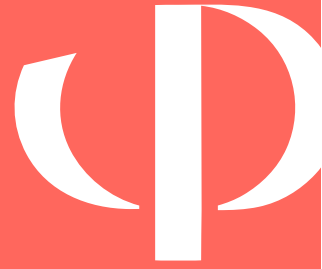


# Feminism and Philosophy



SPRING 2021

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

# Feminism and Philosophy

LAUREN FREEMAN, EDITOR

VOLUME 20 | NUMBER 3 | SPRING 2021

## GUEST EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

### *Outsiders Within: Reflections on Being a First-Generation and/or Low-Income Philosopher*

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BROWN UNIVERSITY

Heather Stewart  
WESTERN UNIVERSITY

It is our humble pleasure to present this special issue of the *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*. This issue brings together a variety of diverse voices to reflect on the experiences, challenges, barriers, and joys of pursuing philosophy from the position of a first-generation student and/or person from a low socioeconomic background.

This issue grew out of a number of conversations we, Arianna Falbo and Heather Stewart, have had about diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the discipline of philosophy. Over the course of these conversations, we observed that despite the increased attention to matters of diversity in the profession (and efforts to “diversify” the profession), meaningful conversations about first-generation status, socioeconomic class, poverty, and the significance of these experiences in the lives of those who do (or do not) choose to pursue philosophy were generally lacking. This is a problem, we believe, because class-related concerns oftentimes pose significant barriers to entering into, and successfully remaining within, the field. Thus, it’s imperative that more careful attention be given to these topics and that more serious conversations about issues of class status in the profession are had, especially among those with the power to increase support for members (or would-be members) of our discipline from these backgrounds.

In an effort to spark such conversations, we organized a session at the 2020 Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association, held in Philadelphia, PA. The session (which shared its name with this issue) brought together four panelists to share and reflect on their experiences as first-generation students and/or students from working-class backgrounds or conditions of poverty. We are delighted that two of the panelists, Ashley Lamarre and Zinhle ka’Nobuhlaluse, have developed and expanded upon their presentation from the session in a contribution

for this issue. (For an overview of the highlights from this session, you can find it on the [Blog of the APA](#).) The panel was very well received, and many attendees of the session and other colleagues encouraged us to keep this conversation going. This issue is an effort to do so.

Before discussing the contents of the issue itself, it is worth situating ourselves in relation to its content. We come to this topic as a matter of having deep personal connections to it. That is, we both personally share in some of the experiences reflected by the issue’s authors, and have come to philosophy from positions typically underrepresented in the field.

Arianna is a first-generation college student. Neither of her parents attended college, and her father, an immigrant who moved to Canada from Italy, left high school in the tenth grade to take a job working in a steel fabrication factory in order to support his family. Arianna is among the first in her immediate and extended family to receive any graduate or professional schooling. Her parents have instilled in her the importance of ambition and a strong work ethic, and she holds tightly onto these values as she progresses through graduate school. Reflecting upon the hard work of her parents, as well as her grandparents and generations before them, she feels incredibly fortunate to have had the opportunity to go to university and to be currently pursuing a doctoral degree. This is an opportunity that simply wasn’t in the cards for her parents, and she recognizes that her schooling is the direct result of their sacrifice and determination to provide opportunities to their children which they never had. For Arianna, college was an awkward and uncomfortable time of intellectual and personal growth. Everyone else in her classes seemed to know what they were doing and how everything worked; they were confident and in control. But she always felt out of place, anxious, and confused. Growing up, she had few examples of what post-secondary education was like, and it took a long time for her to gain the confidence needed to feel at ease in philosophy classes. Arianna is indebted to a handful of inspiring mentors, who she looks up to and respects, not only as brilliant and careful philosophers, but also as supportive, genuinely good, and down-to-earth people, who have helped her to find her voice in the philosophy classroom, and to find her place in the profession more broadly. She owes much of her intellectual growth and success in the field to their continued support; she wouldn’t be doing philosophy today had she not had their guidance.

Heather is also the first in her family to attend college or university, and comes from a working-poor background.

After her father, a factory worker, passed away suddenly when Heather and her brother, Sean, were young children, Heather's stay-at-home mother, Alice, became a *single*, stay-at-home mother. Their family of three managed to get by, thanks to a vast array of social safety-net programs, until Heather's mom remarried when Heather was in high school. Heather's step-father, Barry, is also a blue-collar factory worker. Growing up, Heather's parents always supported her and her brother's many interests, and particularly, Heather's boundless curiosity and love of reading, writing, and thinking. Heather and her Ma made frequent visits to the local library to check out massive stacks of books, which Heather would inevitably devour far too quickly. Heather's mother always prioritized using the small bits of disposable cash she had on materials to fuel the intellectual fire sparking in Heather: subscriptions to *National Geographic* and *Scholastic Kids* magazines, and even encyclopedias the family would receive by mail. Though she never received a post-secondary education of her own, Heather's mom made every effort to foster a love of learning in Heather; even when finances were tight, she found creative ways to keep Heather engaged. Heather bounced through a number of public schools before graduating with a keen desire to go to university. With a combination of scholarships, grants, and a hefty amount of student loans, she was able to do so, becoming the first in her family to pursue and receive a university education. Heather's brother, Sean, has worked a series of jobs after high school, and is currently pursuing his own passion—professional wrestling. Where Heather grew up, furthering one's education is a luxury, not a given. And Heather feels unimaginably fortunate every single day for the invaluable mentorship she has had to help her along her educational journey, from a terrified undergraduate working multiple part-time jobs and agonizing over accruing student loans to her current self, months away from completing her PhD (and still having no idea how exactly that happened).

It is from these personal experiences that we conceived of this project, and from these perspectives that we present this issue to you. Before doing so, we offer an overview of the issue's contents, themes, and goals.

To begin, let us explain our reasons for our choice of title, "Outsiders Within: Reflections on Being a First-Generation and/or Low-Income Philosopher." In using the terminology of "outsiders within," we are indebted to Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins.<sup>1</sup> In coining the term, Collins highlights the unique experiences of Black women entering the academy. The concept of the "outsider within" is used by Collins to underscore how one's belonging to a social group, and that group's situatedness within a particular historical context—pertaining to race, gender, and socioeconomic disparities and inequalities—has the potential to contribute to and enrich their perspective on the social world. As it relates to this issue, we draw upon Collins's concept of the "outsider within" as a powerful hermeneutic tool. In later work, Collins says:

I now use the term outsider-within to describe social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power. Individuals claim identities as *outsiders within*; by their placement in these

social locations. Thus, outsider-within identities are situational identities that are attached to specific histories of social injustice—they are not a decontextualized identity category divorced from historical social inequalities that can be assumed by anyone at will. What I aim to do with this shift is refocus attention back on the unequal power relations of race, class, and gender that produce social locations characterized by injustice.<sup>2</sup>

The status of the *outsider within* is apt in the case of philosophers who come from poor or working-class backgrounds and/or who are first-generation (especially when compiled with additional intersectional experiences of oppression and/or disadvantage) because such philosophers often find themselves straddling two disparate social worlds with stark differences in power, norms, values, and social status. This perspective and experience of being an *outsider* within the academy is prevalent in the narratives and shared experiences in this volume. This concept helps to home in upon the unique perspectives of philosophers in the academy who are first-generation and/or who come from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as the important intersectional differences between them, and the critical insights they bring to discussions of diversity and inclusion in the profession.

There are a number of themes which have emerged across the pieces included in this issue that are important to note. The first is the theme of *double alienation*: of feeling alienated or, as though one is an outsider, upon entering into academic philosophy as someone from a working-class and/or first generation-background, while at the same time feeling alienated and less able to relate to one's family and home communities as a result of one's academic lifestyle. Fitting into an academic environment oftentimes requires that one navigate a social space structured by prestige and social hierarchy. One is forced to submerge themselves in a world of new culture, norms, and expectations. Oftentimes, trying to fit in with the norms and lifestyle of the academy results in a weakening of the connections to one's previous home life: missing important milestones (e.g., weddings, births, funerals); being unable to help and support loved ones at home because of one's academic obligations and geographical seclusion (often resulting in failures to "carry the mental weight" of their hardships, resulting in what Lucia Munguia's contribution categorizes as a potential instance of "epistemic shame"); feeling unable to fully communicate and share your academic life with family and friends back home, many of whom might not understand the value or point of pursuing a life as a philosopher. All the while, many philosophers from socioeconomically disadvantaged and first-generation backgrounds feel importantly *different* from their more privileged peers in the academy, and often find it difficult to relate to their colleagues, or to find sources of community and support within academic spaces. Several contributions to this volume bring to the fore how first-generation and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged philosophers often find themselves *doubly alienated*—feeling as though they are an outsider in academic settings, and in the process of trying to fit in and to cultivate a sense of belonging in academic

spaces, they find themselves becoming increasingly more distant from their previous home life or communities. In effect, such philosophers are often in the position of being outsiders *within* the academy and, in a sense, outsiders *outside* of the academy as well—traveling between two worlds, neither of which feels wholly comfortable.

Related to the idea of double alienation is the feeling of *imposter syndrome*. Imposter syndrome refers to the experience that underrepresented people have of feeling as if their “external markers of success are unwarranted,” and subsequently “fear being revealed as a fraud.”<sup>3</sup> When those around you—your classmates, peers, and professors—all seem to represent a fairly homogenous group, it can be difficult for outsiders to see themselves as really belonging in those spaces, or to feel as if they have something meaningful to contribute. Many of the pieces in this issue offer first-person accounts of experiencing oneself as an “imposter,” and, importantly, at different stages throughout one’s philosophical journey (e.g., Kayla Aceves describes experiencing imposter syndrome as an undergraduate student, while Bailie Peterson makes clear that imposter syndrome often persists, even as one completes a PhD and lands an academic job). While our focus in this issue is on matters of socioeconomic and first-generation status (and thus, the imposter syndrome that results from feeling like an outsider among one’s peers and professors on those grounds), it is worth noting that for those who are members of other social groups that are underrepresented in the profession (e.g., women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+ individuals, folks with disabilities, and as Brady Heiner (this issue) adds, formerly incarcerated folks), the sense of imposter syndrome can be multiplied. When members of our profession who experience this sort of imposter syndrome are not well supported, it can cause real damage: anxiety, self-doubt, and withdrawal.

Widespread experiences of alienation and imposter syndrome bring to light the importance of *mentorship and community with others who share one’s experiences*. This, too, is a theme that runs through many pieces in this issue. Many of the contributors, in describing their experiences in the profession, cite the exceptional value they have found in sharing their experiences with other philosophers who share similar life histories and backgrounds. In reflecting upon the obscure and unwieldy journey that one takes in pursuing a career in academic philosophy, Jennifer Morton’s piece highlights the importance of finding community, and finding others who can “laugh along with you at the absurdity.” Similarly, in her piece, Aceves, who has recently finished an undergraduate degree in philosophy at University of California, San Diego, discusses the value in finding community with other philosophy majors (most of whom were transfer students) who shared similar experiences of feeling lost and as though they didn’t belong in the philosophy classroom. Aceves says: “We could share and bond over the experiences of feeling like the odd-one-out in a classroom.” This need for community is also expressed in the piece from Ashley Lamarre and Zinhle ka’Nobuhlaluse, who describe the importance of sisterhood and solidarity that they found in each other as Black women from working-class backgrounds collaborating and building networks of mutual support in competitive

academic spaces. John Proios’s contribution emphasizes the importance for underprivileged philosophers (with a focus on graduate students) to cultivate an “oppositional consciousness,” understood as a critical standpoint which helps to preserve one’s sense of self and further facilitates bonds of community and solidarity among students who come to academic philosophy from low-income and/or first-generation backgrounds. Other contributions also emphasized the key role of faculty mentorship and support for first-generation students and students who come from poverty. The pieces from Elvira Basevich and Bailie Peterson (among others) highlight concrete recommendations for how faculty and administrators in positions of power can help to make academic philosophy more accessible to students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds.

Finally, we would be remiss not to mention the many practical challenges and financial barriers first-generation and/or students from low-income backgrounds face when deciding to pursue philosophy. While many first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged people face barriers to obtaining a higher education at all (and often incur substantial debt to do so), there is often added pressure to pursue a lucrative degree or career—one that can potentially lift oneself and their family out of poverty or otherwise provide an opportunity for upward mobility. For such students, the decision to pursue philosophy (with its perpetually grim job prospects) can be particularly weighty (even when, as Elvira Basevich describes, they have fallen in love with it). For all students, regardless of class standing, the decision to study philosophy can reflect a significant financial risk, especially when one acquires debt in the process. However, this risk is heightened for people without familial wealth or financial safety nets to fall back on should they not find a stable job post graduation.

When students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds find themselves in graduate programs, they often experience financial hardship throughout—experiences many of their peers can alleviate by drawing on family support. Graduate stipends tend to be marginal, often barely covering living costs for a single person (let alone one’s dependents, should they have them, or should they need to send money to family or loved ones back home). Many graduate students find themselves taking on additional work (e.g., adjunct-teaching, or outside part-time jobs) to make ends meet. This can, of course, slow or hinder progression towards their degree, and place them at a disadvantage relative to peers who might be positioned to devote most of their time to their graduate work (this experience isn’t by any means unique to graduate students, and is also felt at the undergraduate level, as the piece from Kayla Aceves makes clear). Furthermore, for socioeconomically disadvantaged graduate students or precariously employed junior scholars, many dimensions of professional life and activity might be off limits entirely (e.g., they might not be able to pay out of pocket for conference costs while awaiting reimbursement; or, they might not have credit cards or sufficient credit to book hotel rooms or flights). This, in turn, can exclude such philosophers from critical professionalization and networking opportunities, often at points in their career trajectory when they are most



important. Finally, when socioeconomically disadvantaged people do successfully complete graduate degrees in philosophy, they might end up pushed out of the field as a result of job insecurity, compounded by a lack of financial fallbacks. People without financial support or stability cannot, for example, go on the job market year after year hoping to secure a permanent job. As such, some of the voices that the discipline needs the most might find themselves leaving it out of financial necessity.

We raise these concerns because, though they pose serious, tangible barriers to members of our profession who come from underprivileged-class backgrounds, they might go unnoticed by those with the power to enact more support for first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Often, such financial concerns are fairly far removed from more senior people in the field, or those in administrative positions. We hope to place these issues on the radar of those with professional and institutional power, who we hope will come to see them as critical dimensions of equity, inclusion, and justice in our profession moving forward.

With these themes and concerns in mind, we now offer a taste of what is to come in this issue.

First, Jennifer Morton's piece, "**Flourishing in the Academy: Complicity and Compromise,**" brings together a wealth of insights on a range of topics facing first-generation and socioeconomically disadvantaged students, especially in the context of elite institutions of higher education. Morton discusses the cultural mismatch that such students confront upon entering college, trying to reconcile their previous life experience with their newfound experiences as a college student. In the context of academic philosophy, Morton describes how a range of social and cultural forces limit and constrain not only who enters into graduate programs and who ends up becoming faculty in the profession, but also which sorts of research agendas and topics are regarded as rigorous or worthy of serious engagement, and, more generally, what counts as genuine *philosophy*. Additionally, Morton's contribution chronicles her experiences teaching philosophy across different institutions, including her experience teaching at City College of New York, which she describes as "full of ambitious working-class kids striving to realize the promise of higher education." A key insight that Morton develops in her article concerns the difficult ethical compromises that many first-generation and working-class students face as they ascend the ranks of higher education (e.g., choosing between helping a sick loved one, studying for an exam, going to class, or going to work to pay rent). In reflecting upon her own experiences and life choices, Morton appeals to the notion of a *double bind* to offer a window into the ethical compromises she has confronted throughout her career. She considers how her educational background at elite institutions reinforces and contributes to hierarchies of prestige in the profession, as well as her choice to advance her career by taking a job at a more prestigious university. Moreover, she discusses the strain that her career ambitions have placed upon her family relationships, what she describes as one of the most painful ethical compromises she has had to confront. She says of her family that "We love each other, but I am

now part of a world whose logic is mysterious to them." This compromise, namely, how academic ambitions can make one feel like an outsider in the spaces where one previously felt most familiar and at home, seems to be a shared feeling among philosophers from first-generation and working-class backgrounds, and is a topic that is discussed across many of the pieces in this newsletter. Morton ends her contribution by emphasizing the value of friendship, community, and finding networks of support when traversing the challenges that a career in academic philosophy presents.

In his contribution, "**Ethical Narratives and Oppositional Consciousness,**" John Proios engages with and builds upon arguments in Jennifer Morton's recent book, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way* (2019), specifically through the lens of a graduate student from a working-class background guiding their way through the complexities of elite institutions. Proios persuasively argues for the importance of *oppositional consciousness*: "an adversarial self-conception in which one sees oneself as a member of a subordinated group in an unjust hierarchy that calls for resistance and displacement with new, non-hierarchical relations." Oppositional consciousness, Proios argues, is an essential ingredient in allowing students from non-privileged backgrounds to find their voice in academia, while at the same time enabling them to acknowledge important structural forms of exclusion and elitism that permeate academic spaces. Oppositional consciousness, he argues, allows one, in a sense, to stay true to their roots, core identity, and upbringing, while ascending the ranks of academic philosophy—a balancing act that is fraught with moral risks, alienation, and imposter syndrome.

In "**What It's Like to Grow Up Poor, but Fall in Love with Philosophy: A Notice to the Profession in Case it Forgot,**" Elvira Basevich offers a powerful narrative which traces her journey into the world of academic philosophy as someone coming from a life of poverty. Basevich shares personal experiences as a student of the New York City public school system and as a young woman facing homelessness throughout her twenties. Basevich highlights the key role that support and mentorship from faculty had throughout her undergraduate studies as a poor undergraduate student who found herself hooked on philosophy. Philosophy provided her with the tools she needed to frame and make sense of her own life experiences and hardships, and also served as an empowering vehicle by which she could carve out a path forward for herself. Drawing upon a range of Toni Morrison's work (and in particular Morrison's scholarship on memory and the notion of "rememories"), Basevich compellingly argues for the vital importance of cultivating genuine forms of inclusion and belonging in academic philosophy, and outlines a series of concrete recommendations for how to support first-generation and low-income students: through early career mentorship, monetary support, and more.

In "**Knowing What to Order at the Conference Dinner,**" Ian James Kidd draws on a story of a post-conference dinner to situate broader reflections about the confusing, exclusionary norms of professional behavior, and how such norms can be both terrifying and alienating for those for

whom they are unfamiliar. As Kidd's discussion renders evident, a great deal of critically important networking and professionalization takes place at these informal events (e.g., the post-conference dinner, the wine and cheese reception). And yet, these events can be deeply uncomfortable for those who either lack the insider knowledge of how to behave at such events, or who lack the financial means to comfortably participate in them. While this might seem like a fairly minor concern to those who have never had the experience of feeling like an outsider at these events, Kidd makes clear why those with more seniority and privilege in the discipline (economically and otherwise) should slow down and think critically about these events and their significance: they are potential sites for reproducing and reinforcing injustice in the profession. This is because opting out of such events (e.g., because one cannot afford the expensive dinner or cocktail hour) could have negative implications for one's professional prospects, while the opportunity to fully participate can have numerous professional benefits. Kidd offers some practical suggestions for how to make these informal events more widely accessible by alleviating some of the class-coded pressures they often involve.

In **"Epistemic Shame as a First-Generation Scholar,"** Lucia Munguia offers an illuminating account of *epistemic shame*. Munguia summarizes recent analyses of epistemic shame, which have assumed that this emotion necessarily involves the realization that one holds a false belief. Drawing upon her personal experiences of navigating between the worlds of academic philosophy as a first-generation graduate student, and her previous home life experiences of coming from a working-class family in Barrio Hollywood in Tucson, Arizona, Munguia calls this assumption about epistemic shame into question. She argues for a more capacious analysis of epistemic shame, which includes one's failure to possess certain beliefs altogether. In doing so, Munguia offers a series of insightful reflections on the relationship between epistemic shame and one's sense of self, and how epistemic shame has the potential to make salient important elements of one's personal identity and one's close personal relationships. Munguia's account of epistemic shame also helps to make sense of the need to do one's part in shouldering the "mental weight" of loved ones' hardships (e.g., by lamenting with them through financial struggles or the demands of care work), even when one's academic lifestyle has distanced one geographically from loved ones.

Ashley Lamarre and Zinhle ka'Nobuhlaluse bring to the fore a number of important insights in their journey of navigating academic philosophy as Black women from working-class backgrounds in **"Marginal Disclosures: Sisterhood, Standpoint, Community and Thriving."** This contribution takes the form of a dialogue between Lamarre and ka'Nobuhlaluse, explaining the importance of the sisterhood that they have found in each other during their graduate studies and how their collaborative work functions to resist the racist, sexist, and classist norms which entail that students, especially those from marginalized background, and in particular Black women, should be in constant competition within the academy. Lamarre and ka'Nobuhlaluse also offer an illuminating

critique of the common task of writing professional documents, such as statements of purpose and diversity statements, for applications to graduate school. Drawing upon Patricia Hill Collins's (2009) analysis of "marketplace ideologies," Lamarre and ka'Nobuhlaluse highlight a need for admissions committees to take pause and seriously consider the value of including diverse practitioners in the field and what it takes to sufficiently include these philosophers in academic spaces. Lamarre and ka'Nobuhlaluse also consider how family obligations often fall upon first-generation students and students from low-income families, with insightful connections to how the pandemic has exacerbated these obligations further, putting increased pressure upon such students as they juggle the demands of familial obligations and academic progress towards career goals. Lamarre and ka'Nobuhlaluse end their piece with an important cautionary note, namely, that we need to be careful to avoid objectifying a single-sided narrative which construes students from working-class and other disadvantaged backgrounds as always struggling in the academy. Their piece itself serves as an example which challenges these common narratives and reflects the importance of sisterhood and solidarity as acts of resistance to the constraints of academia.

Offering the important perspective of a recently graduated, first-generation philosophy undergraduate student, in **"Confessions of a Working-Class Student,"** Kayla Aceves describes the transition from her small, predominantly Latinx border-town of Calexico, California, to university life as an undergraduate student at the University of California, San Diego. Including important insights that administrators, professors, and fellow students alike should be aware of (e.g., the difficult task of balancing work and academics; comparing oneself to their peers; feeling too intimidated to speak up in class; experiencing imposter syndrome) and advice they should heed (e.g., being aware of the discrepancy in available time between students who do and do not have to work while in school; offering flexibility where possible), Aceves's important perspective on the "privilege which surrounds academic philosophy" should not be overlooked. As Aceves notes, a career in reading and writing often looks unrealistic to anyone who does not come from a certain level of material wealth. "Sometimes," she writes, "all of philosophy seems like an activity of leisure and/or performance, depending on how you're doing it and who you're doing it for." But many people without these privileged backgrounds have something important to offer the discipline, if only they can find the time.

In **"Abolition University: Mobilizing Black Feminist Philosophy to Transform Institutions of Higher Education into 'Vehicles of Decarceration' that Affirm the Lives of First-Generation Students,"** Brady Heiner explores the role of institutions of higher education in the constructive project of abolition. He argues that institutions of higher education can become critical sites of decarceration which affirm the lives of first-generation, formerly incarcerated students and promote broader social justice. Using his firsthand experience as the founder and executive director of the California State University Project Rebound Consortium as his lens, Heiner presents a series of concrete ways in which institutions of higher education can better serve

formerly incarcerated students, the majority of whom are first-generation students. Programs like Project Rebound simultaneously resist the harms of incarceration while also engaging in a positive project of constructing infrastructures of care. Importantly, programs such as Project Rebound can help formerly incarcerated, first-generation students establish a sense of belonging within the academy and their broader communities. Through such “student-centered, grassroots-oriented empowerment work,” first-generation, formerly incarcerated students, faculty, and staff can “inspire and reconstruct universities so that they begin to crowd out the prison industrial complex, so that the prison industrial complex inhabits increasingly smaller areas not only of our social and psychic landscape, but of our state and municipal budgets.” In so doing, institutions of higher education become critically important vehicles of abolition and of social justice.

In the final piece, “**Supporting First-Generation Philosophers at Every Level**,” Bailie Peterson reflects upon her own experiences as a first-generation student and professor to offer concrete recommendations for how those in the profession can better serve their first-generation and financially disadvantaged students. She does so by making explicit a number of subtle ways in which well-intentioned professors can unintentionally contribute to the challenges and insecurities their first-generation and financially disadvantaged students face, and by offering concrete tools for beginning to improve upon them. Peterson draws attention to the often overlooked and insidious ways in which professors can contribute to the myths that underprivileged students are doomed to fail or that people “like them” don’t belong in academic spaces. She then offers ways to resist these myths by cultivating communities, both within and beyond the classroom, that demonstrate respect for others, help students establish a sense of belonging, and take students’ comments and contributions seriously. All of these, Peterson argues, are critical steps towards making philosophy genuinely inclusive for students and junior faculty who come from disadvantaged class backgrounds.

In addition to the contributions just mentioned, in this issue you will find the following book reviews: Nancy J. Hirschmann’s review of Margaret McLaren’s *Women’s Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice*, Joan Eleanor O’Bryan’s review of Éléonore Lépinard’s *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Post-Secular Times*, Vanessa Wills’s review of Kate Manne’s *Entitled*, and Fulden İbrahimhakkıoğlu’s review of Laura Roberts’s *Irigaray and Politics: A Critical Introduction*.

We hope that you enjoy reading and reflecting on the pieces contained in this issue. But, more importantly, we hope that you will continue to bear these things in mind, and work to make our discipline more welcoming to and inclusive of those who come to philosophy from non-traditional backgrounds. With that, we proudly bring you this special issue.

Before concluding, we would be remiss without saying the following. We are grateful to Lauren Freeman, editor of the newsletter, for trusting us with the opportunity to

guest edit this issue. Her belief in the importance of this topic and this conversation means a lot to us, as does her support of us. As we both noted above, we would not be in the positions we are if not for the patience, guidance, and diligent care of our mentors. Though there have been many, we want to acknowledge a few people in the field who have impacted us as young philosophers, and have showed us what professional philosophy *can* be: Arianna is grateful to Gurpreet Rattan, her undergraduate mentor (who is in many ways responsible for having sparked her initial interest in philosophy and the desire to pursue it professionally), Endre Begby, her MA supervisor, as well as Elizabeth Miller and Joshua Schechter, her PhD committee members, and David Christensen, her PhD advisor, all of whom have been sources of endless generosity, guidance, and support. Heather is grateful to the entire philosophy department at the University of Louisville, but especially to Lauren Freeman, Avery Kolers, John Gibson, and her former mentor, Nancy Potter. She is also grateful to her MA advisor, Alison Jaggar, and her PhD supervisor, Carolyn McLeod. To all of you, thank you for believing in us, often far more than we believed in ourselves. In making this issue a reality, we are grateful to everyone who responded to our call for papers for sharing their stories and experiences with us. We are especially grateful for the contributors for allowing us the opportunity to publish their important words and to share them with a broader audience. Finally, we are grateful to those who have shared in this conversation with us along the way, including all of the participants and attendees at the 2020 APA Eastern Division session in Philadelphia, PA, on this topic, members of the APA Graduate Student Council, and our own partners and families.

#### NOTES

1. Patricia Hill Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within,” *Social Problem* 33, no. 6 (1986): S14-S32.
2. Patricia Hill Collins, “Reflections on the Outsider Within,” *Journal of Career Development* 26, no. 1 (1999): 85-88.
3. Katherine Hawley, “What is Imposter Syndrome?” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 93, no. 1 (2019): 203–26.

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## ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER ON FEMINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

The *Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* is sponsored by the APA Committee on the Status of Women (CSW). The newsletter is designed to provide an introduction to recent philosophical work that addresses issues of gender. None of the varied philosophical views presented by authors of newsletter articles necessarily reflect the views of any or all of the members of the Committee on the Status of Women, including the editor(s) of the newsletter, nor does the committee advocate any particular type of feminist philosophy. We advocate only that serious philosophical attention be given to issues of gender and that claims of gender bias in philosophy receive full and fair consideration.



## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

**1. Purpose:** The purpose of the newsletter is to publish information about the status of women in philosophy and to make the resources of feminist philosophy more widely available. The newsletter contains discussions of recent developments in feminist philosophy and related work in other disciplines, literature overviews and book reviews, suggestions for eliminating gender bias in the traditional philosophy curriculum, and reflections on feminist pedagogy. It also informs the profession about the work of the APA Committee on the Status of Women. Articles submitted to the newsletter should be around ten double-spaced pages and must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language. Please submit essays electronically to the editor or send four copies of essays via regular mail. All manuscripts should be prepared for anonymous review. References should follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

**2. Book Reviews and Reviewers:** If you have published a book that is appropriate for review in the newsletter, please have your publisher send us a copy of your book. We are always seeking new book reviewers. To volunteer to review books (or some particular book), please send the editor, Lauren Freeman ([lauren.freeman@louisville.edu](mailto:lauren.freeman@louisville.edu)), a CV and letter of interest, including mention of your areas of research and teaching.

**3. Where to Send Things:** Please send all articles, comments, suggestions, books, and other communications to the editor: Dr. Lauren Freeman, University of Louisville, [lauren.freeman@louisville.edu](mailto:lauren.freeman@louisville.edu).

**4. Submission Deadlines:** Submissions for spring issues are due by the preceding November 1; submissions for fall issues are due by the preceding February 1.

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## ESSAYS

### *Flourishing in the Academy: Complicity and Compromise*

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From the first week of graduate school, my friend Richie Kim and I were inseparable. People thought we were cliquish or dating. Neither was true. We were accused of thinking we were too cool for school. That might not have been far from the truth. Richie and I were an unlikely pair—he, a well-dressed, baseball-loving, club-hopping Kantian; I, a slightly disheveled, bespectacled, bookish empiricist. And, yet, our senses of humor existed on the same wavelength, one inaudible to our classmates. But something far deeper anchored our bond. We were both first-generation students and the only two racial minorities in our cohort. When

Richie would tell me about his complicated family life, I was not taken aback. I too had stories to tell. When I would roll my eyes at a question during the colloquium, I knew that when I looked up Richie would be smirking with me. Our friendship was a safe space from an academic world that we both wanted to succeed in but which neither of us wanted to belong in. This is the paradox for so many first-generation and working-class students.

Academic institutions are social institutions. Our success depends not just on our good work, but on the approval, support, and acceptance of those who command the classrooms and seminar rooms. And, yet, for people like Richie and me, that social world feels foreign, sometimes hostile, and often kind of dull. We are caught between wanting to gain the approval of those who set the terms and suspecting that their approval means that we have turned into precisely the people we do not want to be.

### I. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL CAPITAL IN THE ACADEMY

To understand the dynamics of philosophy as a set of institutional practices, we must understand the broader social dynamics at play in the educational institutions within which our departments exist. Inspired by the work of Bourdieu, who argued that social and cultural capital is critical to understanding hierarchies of class,<sup>1</sup> social scientists have been seeking to understand how these forces operate in American colleges and universities. What they find is that these social and cultural dynamics often benefit those who arrive on campus already at an advantage.

Nicole Stephens's work shows us that first-generation college students often experience a mismatch between the culture they bring to school and the one that they find reflected within its walls.<sup>2</sup> Whereas many students from working-class backgrounds grow up with an interdependent culture in which they understand their own flourishing in relationship to others, upper middle-class students grow up shaped by an independent culture that puts their individual autonomy at the forefront. She suggests that this mismatch is responsible for the achievement gap between first-generation college students and those whose parents attended college. Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton's devastating ethnography of a flagship public university shows us how such institutions are organized to satisfy the paying customers—out-of-state students seeking "the college experience."<sup>3</sup> The collateral of this model are women from working class backgrounds who end up falling through the cracks of a set of institutional pathways that are not designed for them. And, finally, Anthony Jack's incisive work uncovers the work that culture, as distinct from economic class, plays. He finds that not all low-income students of color face the same challenges at selective universities.<sup>4</sup> Some attend private, well-endowed high schools that prepare them for the culture of the upper middle-class milieu that dominates highly selective universities in the United States. These privileged poor students flourish, while their disadvantaged counterparts have trouble making friends, developing mentoring relationships with faculty, and feeling at home on campus.

This research shows us that the internal social and cultural forces at play in academic institutions determine how social and economic background influence students' experiences. That feeling of discomfort many first-generation and low-income students feel reflects the social dynamics that dominate many academic institutions, in particular, the sort of elite places that are a fast-track into positions in the academy. Those who grow up with parents, neighbors, and peers who resemble the faculty, administrators, and students at those universities, unsurprisingly, find them comfortable and welcoming places in which to flourish academically and socially. For those of us who do not come from that world, the experience is that of being an outsider.

In theory, being an outsider should be an advantage. Universities are devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and insofar as they draw the people carrying out that research from a narrow slice of the population, the resulting work will be epistemically impoverished. Because students from first-generation or low-income backgrounds arrive on campus with different cultural models and different educational trajectories, they have the potential to contribute to diversifying the epistemic viewpoints that are represented. That is, if educational institutions are an important site of epistemic injustice,<sup>5</sup> then redressing our epistemic blinders requires that we actively recruit those whose capacity to contribute knowledge has historically been sidelined. Or so the theory goes, and many efforts to diversify faculty are driven by something like this argument.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, there is a disconnect between this widely accepted argument and the social reality. The institutional practices of admission, hiring, promotion, and the rest are often driven by word of mouth, social networks, and institutional reputation: all factors that contribute to the entrenchment of those with the economic, social, and cultural capital in positions of power.<sup>7</sup> In advertisement after advertisement, working-class, first-generation, and minority students are encouraged to apply for faculty positions, but their success in getting the job and succeeding at it is often a function not only of their work but of how well they play along with the expectations and interests of those who dominate the profession.

My impression from being a part of many a hiring committee at both less selective and highly selective places is that the ideal candidate for a philosophy job is a woman of color who has been trained at Princeton or MIT and works in metaphysics, epistemology, or, maybe, philosophy of language or science. Pedigree, in the words of sociologist Lauren Rivera, attests to one's capacity for the kind of work that is seen as "core" to philosophy. As sociologists Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison argue in *The Class Ceiling: Why It Pays to Be Privileged*, the path into elite professions for those who come from working-class backgrounds is not just a matter of merit, but of having the social and cultural capital to present one's merit in a way that is easily recognized by senior figures many of whom come from more privileged backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> Faculty on hiring committees often want to diversify their faculty not by truly diversifying the educational experiences and perspectives of those they hire, but by hiring someone who broadly

shares their perspective of the world despite coming from a different background than them.

## II. THE HIERARCHY OF RESEARCH AGENDAS

The social and cultural forces that entrench advantage not only influence who is in the profession and who receives prized academic positions, but which research agendas are celebrated. The profession confers prestige on projects that have little to no connection with issues that matter to the public and often marginalizes projects that do—practical ethics and applied philosophy of all sorts. (Though I am happy to see that this is changing, albeit slowly.) To be clear, I am not simply talking here about the prestige of ethics over metaphysics or philosophy of language. Even within philosophy of science, for example, some projects have more practical relevance than others, but the prestige is not conferred on this basis. This happens both at the level of which research topics are deemed "important" but also at the level of how this research is conducted.

It's true that in most years there are more faculty jobs in practical subjects, but this is because students want to take those courses and departments need somebody to teach them. Most of the people who teach these courses end-up having to prove their philosophical mettle by doing research in areas that are considered more "serious." So even within ethics and political philosophy, the prestige falls on those whose work is opaque to your average intelligent person. The vast majority of philosophers write for other philosophers who uphold standards of good scholarship that have little to do with, and in some cases are diametrically opposed to, standards of relevance, accessibility, or even sheer interestingness. We claim to aim for clarity and rigor, but, in fact, what we aim for is work that is only intelligible to those who are already in the profession. For all the talk of clarity, few educated non-philosophers can pick-up an article in *Mind* or *Noûs* and figure out what the central argument of a given research paper is or, crucially, why it matters. Work that is written for a non-specialist audience or the general public is tolerated as long as the person can show that they can play by the rules of the specialist audience.

It is no coincidence that the elite institutions who play a big role in conferring prestige have an interest in incentivizing the kind of work that has little connection to those outside of those institutions. This is part of how we stay complicit in an ideology that sustains exclusivity. Plato argued that philosophers who had gained knowledge by becoming familiar with the forms had a duty, as citizens, to come back and explain what they knew to others. In the ideology that dominates our profession, we are encouraged to fail to fulfill this duty. Our research keeps elevating and perpetuating the importance and centrality of projects within the profession that keep us in the cave.

As philosophers we are reluctant to think that our interests and preferences could be influenced by non-rational factors, but, of course, they are.<sup>9</sup> The social and cultural forces at play in educational institutions play a role in what we find interesting, important, and a "contribution" to the literature.

When I first started taking philosophy classes as an undergraduate, I was also taking classes in anthropology, sociology, and women's studies. But I wanted in on philosophy, mostly, because I felt that philosophy classrooms were a place in which I was respected just in virtue of my intellect, not my class, race, gender, or anything else. This is the seductive promise of philosophy, in particular, for those of us whose identities, far too often, lead others to fail to see us as individuals. As I started taking more philosophy courses, I realized that the tacit culture of the department was that the "smart" students shied away from ethics or political philosophy and went in for the "heavy" stuff—philosophy of language, mind, metaphysics. As a curious undergraduate, I was interested in all of it. But I could tell that if I was going to show that I could do the hard work, I needed to cultivate my interest in some fields and not others. As a first-generation woman of color, I was particularly keen to gain respect and standing with this world by showing that I was capable of doing the most "difficult, rigorous, and abstract" work. I was genuinely interested in philosophy of perception, but I was also interested in doing well in the eyes of my professors.

This ambition culminated in my enrollment in Philosophy Analysis in the Twentieth Century. It was known, informally, as a kind of analytical philosophy bootcamp and students interested in graduate school were encouraged to take it. Forty or so unsuspecting undergraduates signed up for the year-long course and by the end of the spring term, fewer than ten of us remained, mostly white men, but for my good friend Vanessa Wills, now also a successful philosopher. Of course, I was proud to have made it through the grueling experience. I learned a lot about how to do the kind of philosophy that got rewarded in the profession at large. I also learned to act assertively and confidently in class. The professor who taught that class brought me close to tears enough times that I developed the kind of thick skin that would serve me well professionally. But this training also shaped my philosophical instincts in a way that made me complicit with a professional hierarchy that often marginalizes rather than welcomes diverse points of view.

I admired women who did the kind of philosophy that was seen as typically male—abstract, rigorous, and difficult. I found it insulting if someone suggested that gender, race, or class played a role in what I thought or why I thought it. In seminars, I acted confidently and aggressively even when I didn't feel either. I looked down on work that was practical in any way. I'm ashamed to admit all of this, but I don't think I was the only one because I saw many students who went through the kind of "elite" education I did develop many of the same attitudes and behavior. Nobody told us what the norms of the profession were explicitly, but we picked them up and internalized them, often to our own detriment. I felt torn when, in graduate school, I realized that I was more interested in moral psychology than the philosophy of perception. As my work took me further and further from the philosophical mainstream, I thought that maybe I should leave the profession. The nagging feeling that the work I was supposed to be doing didn't matter was only made worse by my sense that I wasn't doing a particularly good job at doing it, even as I succeeded enough to stay on the path.

This is only my experience, but the way in which the hierarchy gets reinforced is all around us if you pay attention. I was talking to a colleague recently who was telling me about how a woman in her department was upset that fewer people seem to attend colloquium talks when the speaker was a woman. Her colleagues agreed that it was unfortunate but that the topics that these particular women were talking about were just less "interesting" to them. Or, when I recently attended the first in a series of talks by one of my philosophical heroes and overheard other philosophers after the talk say that what she was doing "wasn't philosophy."<sup>10</sup> I take that they meant this as a disparaging remark because they didn't show up to the next lectures in the series.

These little comments that the talk was just not "interesting" enough to attend or that the talk was "not philosophy" pervade our profession. And yet, as I grew tired of the sort of topics that were deemed worthy by philosophy's elite, I found those ignored topics more exciting and compelling. In fact, if I hadn't gotten interested in the philosophy of education, I might not have stayed in the profession.

### III. LEARNING TO TEACH

My work in the philosophy of education grew out of my dissatisfaction with my teaching. As a newly minted PhD, my first job was as a visiting assistant professor at Swarthmore College. And like many a graduate of a well-regarded PhD program, I started teaching without any knowledge of how to teach effectively. I fumbled. I lectured too much. I let the most vocal students dominate discussion. In sum, I was not really teaching as much as mimicking what I had seen my own professors do. Worse, I was replicating the sort of classroom dynamics that privilege those students who come to college knowing how to take advantage of it. A few months in, one such student came into my office to calmly tell me that what I was doing in the classroom wasn't working for her. She was right. But it was the fact that this student had the courage to talk to me and the knowledge about how to make her point in a polite yet firm way that stunned me. I would have never, ever had the courage to do what she did as an undergraduate. I did not know that I could take ownership of my own education in that way. In an effort to understand why, I started reading more about education and the ways in which social and cultural capital operate in educational institutions. I realized, perhaps for the first time, that I was a first-generation college student and that this had affected my own educational experience.

When I took a position at the City College of New York, my lack of pedagogical training became ever more apparent, but so did the ways in which my experience of college had been an anomaly. CCNY was full of ambitious working-class kids striving to realize the promise of higher education. Teaching, which I had dreaded, became a joy. My students reminded me time and time again of how narrow and constrained my academic experiences had been thus far and how valuable being a good teacher was. I had received my education at the most elite institutions and yet I had never been so challenged in the classroom. My students pushed back on many of the core assumptions of the philosophical mainstream with humor. And to teach them

well, I had to make explicit many of the implicit norms and expectations that I had been operating under.

Yet, by far the most important thing I learned in the ten years I spent teaching in the City University of New York system was that the way we talk about higher education is distorted. We focus too much on admissions into elite colleges and not nearly enough on what is happening to students attending the institutions that are the real engines of transformative education—our public colleges and universities. The challenges I saw my students face had little to do with affirmative action, free speech, or the other ‘hot topics’ in the public discourse around higher education and much more to do with how to succeed at college while playing critical roles in their families and communities. The financial and academic challenges working-class and first-generation students face is but a piece of a broader set of hurdles. What I saw was that they often had to make painful ethical compromises in order to succeed in college and transform their life prospects. The students I taught were caught between, for example, taking a grandparent to the doctor or working fulltime to support their families and studying for an exam or attending class. Whichever choice they made, they felt like they were letting someone they loved or themselves down. This insight became the basis of my book *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*: a book that I would have never been able to write had I only been at the sort of elite institution I attended as an undergraduate and graduate student.

#### IV. DOUBLE BINDS

Sukaina Hirji has recently written a thoughtful paper about how people from oppressed social groups are often caught in oppressive double binds—no matter what they do they become complicit in the oppressive mechanisms that function to oppress them.<sup>11</sup> She argues that what is bad about such situations is not simply that they undermine our autonomy, but rather that they present us with choices that are self-undermining no matter what we do.

To truly diversify the academy would require that we welcome people that have backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives that are truly different than the philosophical mainstream. And yet those who fit this description must convince those who are in positions of power to recognize their contributions in order to be given the positions and support required to advance their intellectual agenda. This pushes us to contort ourselves to fit into a social world in which we do not feel at home. To pursue research agendas that are more connected to the concerns of those outside of the academy, we need to embrace and pursue those projects that relate to aspects of our experiences that make us different. And yet those are the sorts of projects that will not be seen as valuable or understood as properly philosophical within our profession. This pushes us to pursue other projects that will make it easier for us to succeed professionally. To resist the ways in which colleges and universities privilege those who already arrive on campus with the skills and knowledge critical to thriving in the academy, we need to invest time and energy in learning to truly teach all students. And yet the institutional incentives are set up so that doing so comes at

the expense of our own position in the academy.<sup>12</sup> As Hirji argues, whether we give in or resist, we are compromising our own success in the long run.

I write this as a professor with tenure at a well-regarded research institution. In what ways have I compromised? It is too early in my career to provide a definitive autopsy but let me provide a preliminary one.

First, I benefit from and my success reinforces a system whose continued existence makes it harder for people from marginalized backgrounds to succeed. I am a person of color and a first-generation college student, yet I have been credentialed at elite institutions and been mentored by people whose word is trusted by the gatekeepers. This has been critical to my success in the academy. This is not to diminish the work I’ve done, but to acknowledge that I am a part of a system that is exclusionary and elitist. I know that my mere presence within these institutions makes those around me feel better about the fairness of the flawed system that brought them there. I made instrumentally rational choices in the pursuit of my professional goals, but nonetheless my success in doing so buttresses the prestige economy that pervades much of higher education.

Second, I have chosen to take up opportunities for career advancement at the expense of being in a position where my teaching had a direct impact on first-generation, low-income, and minority students. When I was at the City College of New York, my teaching mattered. I became a more empathetic, open, and motivated teacher and I could see that in doing so I was making a concrete difference in the lives of my students. And yet, I no longer teach there. I chose to pursue opportunities that had more research support and prestige. In part my choice was a response to institutional constraints at CUNY that made it increasingly hard to be a good teacher—larger classes, crumbling infrastructure, and less support for students. It was also an intentional move to ensure my work was taken seriously. But though I think my choice was reasonable, it too was a compromise.

The third and final example is the most painful. I have continued to increase the distance between myself and those I love for the sake of my career ambitions. Not only did I decide to pursue higher education thousands of miles away from home, but I became more and more like the people I could not understand growing up—the ones that prioritize work over much of their lives. The pandemic has made this all the more apparent as I am now unable to go see my mom, grandmother, or sister even if I want to. My family doesn’t quite understand my drive and I don’t know how to explain it. We love each other, but I am now part of a world whose logic is mysterious to them. This makes it hard for us to be a part of each other’s lives in the intimate way that we used to be.

Despite having compromised in these ways, I have also refused to compromise in others. I have pursued a research agenda that is, by the professional standards of many philosophers, peculiar. I read more social science than I do philosophy. I value becoming a better teacher and invest my time in doing so. And I make no secret that I



think all academics should invest much more of their time in improving as teachers instead of writing papers that hardly anyone reads. I have gladly taken on many “service” jobs within the profession that focus on teaching even as this is seen as a professional dead-end by some. I care about the profession becoming more inclusive and do my best to mentor students who need it inside and outside of my university. I try to extend the excellent mentorship I received to others even as it takes time from so much else on my plate. Even as my career has played out largely within the confines of academic practices that too often exclude and marginalize, I have tried my best to push on some of those boundaries from within.<sup>13</sup>

To be the first person in your family to pursue higher education is to embark on an exciting, but, in many ways, obscure path. You really do not know what you are going in for—the compromises you will have to make, the challenges you will confront, and the person you will become in the overcoming. The way to get through is to find your Richies—those people that can laugh along with you at the absurdity.

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## Ethical Narratives and Oppositional Consciousness

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... there was no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind. That was the price of the ticket. Poor students would be welcome at the best institutions of higher learning only if they were willing to surrender memory, to forget the past and claim the assimilated present as the only worthwhile and meaningful reality. ... Students from nonprivileged backgrounds who did not want to forget often had nervous breakdowns. They could not bear the weight of all the contradictions they had to confront. They were crushed. More often than not they dropped out with no trace of their inner anguish recorded, no institutional record of the myriad ways their take on the world was assaulted by an elite vision of class and privilege.

– bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, Routledge, 2000, 36–37

#### I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I explore some of the contradictions exposed in my experience pursuing a philosophy PhD, in light of scholarship highlighting challenges for low socio-economic status (SES) undergraduate students. I evaluate the proposal from the philosopher Jennifer M. Morton (2019) that low-SES students need “clear-eyed ethical narratives” to navigate higher education. I argue that, in order to develop these narratives, low-SES graduate students must self-conceive in a way that incorporates “oppositional consciousness.”

#### II. HIGHER EDUCATION AND SES

In the last few decades, higher education has sought to foster diversity through recruitment and financial support for low-SES undergraduates,<sup>1</sup> but it has struggled to achieve genuine inclusion. Low-SES undergraduates often strain to navigate the “hidden curriculum,” such as the norms governing networking, classroom behaviors, the use of office hours, or student groups.<sup>2</sup> They can also be confronted with their comparative disadvantage through common displays of expensive clothing, being unable to afford participation in student clubs, or being hired to clean up after wealthier students.<sup>3</sup> They may be forced to choose between school and caring for an ill relative, or face hunger in light of the need to stay on campus over a break.<sup>4</sup> Although many social forces (e.g., race, citizenship) structure these challenges, the problems represent a broad failure to take account of SES as a factor in a student’s ability to participate in higher education.

Morton focuses on how low-SES students are burdened with special “ethical costs” that arise from the combination of their backgrounds and the norms of higher education.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, where they are from—their neighborhoods,



families, friends—are parts of who they are and often present demands on them while they are in school. On the other hand, in order to escape the socio-economic conditions that are the pretext for seeking a degree, they are pressured to forgo these ties. For example, Morton describes a student who feels that “one of the more difficult aspects of his path upward had been not allowing himself to be ‘dragged’ back down by those who mattered most to him—family and friends . . . strivers trying to move upward can be held back and pulled on by those whom they love.”<sup>6</sup> Social alienation from their homes is one dimension of the challenges low-SES students face, but others may be more straightforwardly economic, for example, being compromised by obligations to support a family member who cannot afford medical care or faces chronic food insecurity.<sup>7</sup> In this way, low-SES students must make personal sacrifices to satisfy norms that reflect the middle- and upper-class culture of higher education. Yet, this dynamic undermines traditional narratives of higher education as a straightforward path of upward mobility, in which students bear only the costs of tuition and hard work.<sup>8</sup> Any attempt to correct this situation requires new, more informed narratives.<sup>9</sup>

One reason I am interested in this issue, and Morton’s work, is that it captures aspects of my experience as an undergraduate. I grew up in a gentrifying small town in New York, where my father had grown up in working poverty. He earned the sole income for our family of four as a self-employed house painter; renting run-down old homes that he tried to make safer allowed us to hide in a white area above our SES.<sup>10</sup> Around the time I left, my father became unable to paint due to work-related illness, my mother became the sole income earner as a housekeeper, and my only sibling dropped out of high school. I strongly considered going to work as a painter full-time, but I settled for taking my sibling in, and offering my parents, who relocated to a poorer area, limited support as a student. In order to succeed as a student, I often felt that I needed distance from my family’s habits and ways of thinking, which I saw as trapped in cycles of desperation. Yet, I was also alienated from my student peers, whom I perceived to be better educated, more adept in classrooms, more financially secure, and generally happier. I was conscious of the fact that I cooked them breakfast in the morning and burgers at night and listened to their conversations as I drove them to the movies so that I could secure basic necessities. I felt caught between my obligations to my family, my attempt to transcend the conditions of our lives, and the sense that this part of my identity created a barrier between me and my learning community.

Hence, I am interested in Morton’s alternative to the traditional “ethical narrative” about upward mobility in higher education: the “clear-eyed ethical narrative.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the traditional narrative of higher education as a straightforward path of upward mobility, Morton proposes that low-SES students develop narrative self-conceptions that foreground how, as a condition of mobility, they will have to make personal, compromising sacrifices—“ethical costs.” On the other hand, a clear-eyed ethical narrative connects these costs to hope for improvement of the social conditions that create them through the resources

of mobility.<sup>12</sup> This commitment is an important domain for a low-SES student to consider in order to avoid one of the ethical costs they will encounter: complicity.<sup>13</sup> By reflecting on the needs brought to light in their personal experiences, and by using the resources they acquire once they have graduated to try to meet those needs, a low-SES student can work to undo the social conditions that created their own struggles, rather than perpetuate them.

While Morton focuses on undergraduate education, her account offers a useful frame of inquiry into similar issues in graduate education, which will be my focus for the rest of the paper.<sup>14</sup> When a low-SES student moves from undergraduate to graduate education, their pre-college communities will likely suffer from similar problems. Moreover, barriers to undergraduate inclusion persist in graduate school, and may even be intensified—for instance, graduate education is likely to increase high-SES representation; universities frequently offer less resources for low-SES graduate students than they do for undergraduates (e.g., grant and loan programs, student unions, and support offices); graduate professionalization is often personally costly and, for example, a disabled low-SES graduate student may struggle to meet their own needs on a low-paying stipend and university health insurance. In the next section, I argue that the threats of complicity in graduate school offer resources to critique Morton’s model of an ethical narrative.

### III. EXTENDING THE NARRATIVE

When I went to college, I sometimes confronted more hunger than I could afford to feed. At some of the lowest points, I survived on the cheapest grocery food and meals that I took through my job in the cafeteria. Even then, I lost weight.

Being a graduate student has meant facing conflicts with my relationship to food. The first time I attended a department-paid dinner at a fancy restaurant, I was overjoyed—but this feeling eventually turned into an uncomfortable acknowledgement about academic food culture. I once organized a workshop involving many well-regarded scholars. For the final night, I planned, delivered, and set up the catered dinner from one of the local faculty-favorites. I was somewhat uncomfortable from the behind-the-scenes look I had been given into the dinner, particularly how expensive and lavish it felt. Yet, what troubled me more was that this dinner went largely uneaten by the end of the night. Cleaning up afterward, I was overwhelmed by anger, sadness, and a feeling of guilt. I remembered the way my father would take leftover or expiring food and cook it into scrambled eggs; the bowls of pasta that got me through the worst times as a student; how SNAP benefits were feeding my infant nephew. This contrast made me feel that the use of departmental resources for feeding academics acknowledges no moral limiting conditions stemming from the material realities of poverty. Yet, I had attended the same workshop with the same catering in previous years and never cared to think about the food. Now I had helped provide it.

In my experience, this example reflects the fact that attitudes toward material scarcity and plenty in academia

are rooted in middle- and upper-class culture. Common professional norms governing food and drink reflect the dominant, high-SES perspective. As a result, low-SES graduate students risk being complicit in practices that perpetuate the inequalities that harmed us, may still harm family and friends, and for many graduate students without outside financial support, us, too.

To underscore how threatening this can be to one's sense of integrity, I will relay another story. In my second year in graduate school, barely a year after earning a BA, I received several teaching related assignments that made me extremely uncomfortable. I was in a program that supported many of its students and faculty through a private think-tank attached to the University (the "Center"), which focused on libertarian political philosophy and economics. I was given a TA assignment for a class organized by the Center on ethics and economics. Throughout the semester, students were taught that markets are good, governments are inept and corrupt, and the best way to help poor people is to deregulate the economy. The little attention paid to alternative views made them into caricatures. A survey at the start and end of the term asked the students a series of questions about regulation and markets in order to measure how much the course shifted their beliefs—it was rumored that this was for attracting donors. At the same time, I was asked to participate in a program that involved teaching versions of these lessons to high school students.

I felt that I was being called on to participate in upholding class hierarchies through teaching a harmful ideology. Moreover, these were my official assignments in exchange for my stipend, health insurance, tuition waiver, and status as a PhD student. At that point in my life, my stipend was around what my family earned, and I had been uninsured before. I saw the relationship I was being asked to enter as reflecting, personally, the social inequality it would perpetuate in the classroom.

I suggest that Morton's "clear-eyed ethical narrative" runs into two families of problems when applied to situations like these. First, her strategy for identifying ethical costs fails to account for the ways that low-SES graduate students are pressured to conceptualize their challenges in ways that erase the moral framing necessary to identify them as injustices. She suggests that constructing a clear-eyed ethical narrative is a personal, reflective process, but it should also be cultivated through a community, including spaces for sharing experiences.<sup>15</sup> Yet, for example, while I spoke to other graduate students about my teaching assignments, the common reaction was to sympathize with my discomfort but offer some excuse: this is part of the price of graduate school, which is a privilege, and it is OK to take "dirty money" as an already marginal graduate student. I felt that similar barriers prevented me from sharing my discomfort about the food. Hence, being "clear-eyed" requires that one be able to navigate the ways that peers, mentors, and norms in higher education exert pressure on a low-SES graduate student's own self-conception in ways that implicitly or explicitly obscure the class hierarchy such a student confronts. (And there may be intersectional issues that further winnow a student's socio-economic community, such as an LGBTQ+ student

who is isolated from their home community due to their sexuality.) This is a missing factor in Morton's proposal. Yet, it is plausible that this pressure must be made explicit in a student's self-conception in order for the student to be able to develop clear-eyed sight of their situation.

Second, Morton's suggestion for avoiding complicity is inadequately long-term and focused on individual action. For example, using Morton's model, I could address the costs I bear in both cases by hoping to use an eventual position as a faculty member to influence food norms in my (future) department, defend left-wing political philosophy, and avoid putting TAs in compromising positions. While I would value these goals as part of my long-term identity as an academic, I still find this a disempowering response. The food is expiring; the ask to teach is present. On Morton's model, the ability to mitigate these costs lives in an uncertain future requiring my own ingenuity and access to elite goods. But this provides no concrete guidance in the immediate present. Moreover, it assumes successful acquisition of access to elite goods in the future, which is far from certain, especially for a low-SES graduate student whose mobility is itself in question (and could be disrupted, for instance, by an unstable economic situation). Finally, Morton's model places the burden on individual students. Of course, individuals must think about what they can do, but as I hope to show below, there are alternatives that center the collective nature of both the problems and the solutions. Insofar as the purpose of Morton's model is ameliorative, these issues suggest that the clear-eyed ethical narrative must be able to do more than center what an individual can do for long-term reform.

#### IV. OPPOSITIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

In response to these challenges, I claim that an adequate clear-eyed ethical narrative for a low-SES graduate student incorporates "oppositional consciousness," an adversarial self-conception in which one sees oneself as a member of a subordinated group in an unjust hierarchy that calls for resistance and displacement with new, non-hierarchical relations. Sociologists Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine offer the following definition:

An oppositional consciousness is an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination. Minimally, that mental state includes identifying with a subordinate group, concluding that the mechanisms that have produced at least some of the group inequalities are unjust, opposing the injustice, and seeing a common interest within the subordinate group in eliminating the injustice. . . . A more full-fledged oppositional consciousness includes seeing some actions of the dominant group as forming in some way a "system."<sup>16</sup>

Oppositional consciousness, as a form of subjectivity, is a way of making sense of reality. The core idea is for members of a group demarcated by shared injustice to develop an awareness of their situation as an oppression by undermining the dominant practices and concepts obscuring it, for example, through creatively formed

conceptual tools for naming and making sense of the injustice.<sup>17</sup> Oppositional consciousness allows members of the group to vindicate their shared experience by bringing it to light in its capacity as unjust, including the various grassroots forms of resistance that might otherwise seem mundane. As political scientist Jane Mansbridge puts it, oppositional consciousness provides an “injustice frame” for making sense of oppression, often first felt as a “gut refusal to be subordinated.”<sup>18</sup>

In the context of SES in graduate education, oppositional consciousness means recognizing one’s subordinated place in the SES hierarchy in higher education, identifying the network of factors perpetuating that hierarchy, and aspiring to transform the power relations among members of the institution to end the hierarchy. In this way, a low-SES graduate student can turn their experiences of injustice, which are likely otherwise only damaging to them, into an important, proactive part of their identity. This can obviously take a number of different forms, and I do not suggest that every low-SES graduate student must see the SES hierarchies they confront in the same way. However, I will offer some ideas about how oppositional consciousness might manifest for a low-SES graduate student and what benefits it could provide.

For example, in my leftover food story, I felt anger, hurt, and guilt, through a connection to those in *my* socio-economic class, in *opposition* to the class around me. This provided the moral framework for evaluating possible courses of action. Out of a sense of duty to myself and to people in my life, I decided to take the leftovers home, package them, and give them away to graduate students and staff. Similarly, feeling connected to beneficiaries of tax-funded social programs, I refused to participate in the high school teaching program, and as a TA, I spent the semester trying to convince the students in my three discussion sections to resist the ideas presented in class; when I had the opportunity to teach the class the next summer, I focused it on socialist and egalitarian political philosophies. These were not necessarily the right responses, but, for me, the ability to find a response that met my immediate needs in any way was possible only by creating group-based distance between myself and the community in which I lived and worked. If my experience can be generalized, it suggests that oppositional consciousness, and the *collective* nature of its division between “us” and “them,” is needed for this clearing of space in which to articulate values and other moral commitments and identify actions that reflect them.

Moreover, oppositional consciousness can address the problems I articulated above. First, it calls for students to find a way to draw a firm boundary between themselves and the elite culture and practices of higher education, because this is necessary for acquiring the moral clarity to identify a socio-economic injustice as such. This partially addresses the lack of recognition of the conceptual pressures a low-SES graduate student faces in Morton’s original model. While there is no simple recipe, oppositional consciousness implies that the kinds of audiences that will be receptive must reject usual ways of thinking and acting as aspects of the existing system of domination. In my experience,

departmental or professional advocacy groups, graduate worker unions, and other (often marginalized) graduate spaces can provide this audience. Once a graduate student has practiced oppositional consciousness, they will be more inoculated against the conceptual pressures I outlined above: a network of beliefs, concepts, and practices will help to name and make sense of SES hierarchies, often or ideally in a way that connects them to other interlocking forms of injustice.

Second, the goal of oppositional consciousness is to end the source of opposition, that is, the existing system of domination. This is a *collective* conflict between two social groups. From this perspective, upward mobility is a form of infiltration: one moves closer to the resources of the dominant group in order to disrupt the existing system. This is an important perspective to inhabit, as it speaks to one of the concerns that an upwardly mobile student might have, namely, that their mobility is ultimately only a further form of domination, by taking them away from their communities and assimilating them into the elite. While Morton highlights the importance of individuals seeking long-term reform to resist this form of complicity, oppositional consciousness allows an individual to see their efforts as part of a larger struggle requiring solidarity. Moreover, it locates that struggle in the immediate present, which can allow a low-SES graduate student to see how they presently occupy unjust relations (e.g., earning poverty wages). Relatedly, oppositional consciousness can provide the psychological fortitude to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in order to identify actions that have immediate effect. As I outlined above, to decide on certain courses of action and to maintain conviction, I thought about how I could express my loyalty to people from my class background who weren’t there with me precisely because of class, with less regard to how this would be received by my peers and supervisors.

Indeed, oppositional consciousness can cultivate a durable sense of hope for improvement grounded in a radical honesty. It arises out of the realization that the only path to well-being comes from confrontation and solidarity. In this way, oppositional consciousness is an aspect of being “clear-eyed” about the sources of the costs of mobility. Moreover, as I suggested above, Morton’s assumption that the sources of these costs are capable of being changed in a fundamental way, and that a low-SES student will find durable mobility, can be undermined by the same system they seek to inhabit and transform. The long-term vision of oppositional consciousness can help mitigate these forces by providing a larger picture in which to embed individual sources of ethical costs, and an expectation of resistance to change as part of its analysis of power struggle. Even if the pathway upward is thwarted, oppositional consciousness provides a framework for understanding why, and for maintaining resolve in a long-term struggle. Thus, the radical honesty of oppositional consciousness creates a foundation for renewing hope.

Yet, I recommend oppositional consciousness as one area of the space comprising a clear-eyed ethical narrative. This is important, for example, because oppositional consciousness is risky—e.g., being adversarial could risk

losing the favor of an advisor who can provide access to professional opportunities. Low-SES students are inherently more economically vulnerable and often more socially isolated; and many low-SES students face multiple oppressions and sources of vulnerability. These challenges require being able to evaluate oppositional consciousness itself, as one factor in a low-SES graduate student's attempt to make sense of their mobility. Still, upwardly mobile individuals have a broad matrix of reasoning that is capable of taking into view competing personal considerations regarding their mobility like these. As the feminist writer bell hooks writes, in a similar context:

When I finished my doctorate I felt too much uncertainty about who I had become. Uncertain about whether I had managed to make it through without giving up the best of myself, the best of the values I had been raised to believe in—hard work, honesty, and respect for everyone no matter their class—I finished my education with my allegiance to the working class intact. Even so, I had planted my feet on the path leading in the direction of class privilege. There would always be contradictions to face. There would always be confrontations around the issue of class. I would always have to reexamine where I stand.<sup>19</sup>

My suggestion is that oppositional consciousness is an essential moral goal for giving shape to this reexamination; it can help graduate students from non-privileged backgrounds orient themselves as they undergo the continued transformation arising from their mobility.

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#### NOTES

1. Anthony A. Jack, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, Harvard University Press, 2019, 6-7 [*Privileged Poor*].
2. *Ibid.*, chapter 2.
3. *Ibid.*, chapters 1, 3.
4. *Ibid.*, chapter 3.
5. Jennifer M. Morton, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility* (Princeton University Press, 2019). Cf. Morton, "The Miseducation of the Elite," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2019): 3-24.
6. *Ibid.*, 47.
7. *Ibid.*, 58-60.
8. *Ibid.*, 37-42.
9. Morton has arguably identified a "hermeneutical" epistemic injustice: the collectively available epistemic resources have a gap (evident in the traditional narrative's inadequacies), due to the inability of low-SES students to participate in constructing those resources, thereby depriving them of the conceptual tools to name and make sense of their experiences. See Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 153-54. Cf. Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," in *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236-57—other forms of epistemic injustice, such as "testimonial smothering," also plausibly arise in contexts of upward mobility.

10. See Reardon, Fox, and Townsend, "Neighborhood Income Composition by Household Race and Income, 1990-2009," *Annals, AAPSS*, 660, July 2015.
11. Morton, *Moving Up*, 120-49.
12. *Ibid.*, 93-94.
13. *Ibid.*, 138-41.
14. Cf. *Ibid.*, 101-04, 108-15.
15. *Ibid.*, 141-45.
16. Aldon Morris and Naomi Braine, "Social Movements and Oppositional Consciousness," in *Oppositional Consciousness: The Subjective Roots of Social Protest*, eds. Jane Mansbridge and Aldon Morris, 20-37 (University of Chicago Press, 2001). See also Chela Sandoval, "Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World: US Third World Feminism, Semiotics, and the Methodology of the Oppressed," (University Microfilms International: A Bell & Howell Information Company, 1993).
17. Cf. Sandoval (1993: 60-64) on making a "third gender category."
18. Jane Mansbridge, "The Making of Oppositional Consciousness," in Mansbridge and Morris, *Oppositional Consciousness*, 5.
19. bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, (Routledge, 2000), 37.

## What It's Like to Grow Up Poor, but Fall in Love with Philosophy: A Notice to the Profession in Case It Forgot

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"So if it's all love, show me love then."

— Cardi B.

Perhaps no issue is more widely debated in feminist philosophy and critical race theory than the role that the experience of oppression should play in our theories. It inspires original, exciting research. Yet in spite of a nominal commitment, our profession struggles to confront the personal experiences of oppression of our students and colleagues. Among academic philosophers, just as in the world at large, group-based vulnerabilities vary widely: racist exclusion and disrespect, statelessness and a lack of formal legal status, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, and childhood poverty. It is vital to respect our differences to build inclusive professional networks and welcome a rising generation of young philosophers whose backgrounds do not align with the privilege, wealth, and whiteness that define academic philosophy. Like fish swimming in poisoned waters, it is hard to notice the background conditions that both sustain academic life and undermine the wellbeing of its participants.

In this short essay, I reflect on my personal experience of what it's like to grow up poor, but to fall in love with philosophy. My motivation is not just to share anecdotes. To be sure, the more we share our stories of hardship, the less the most vulnerable among us will feel like we live with a shameful secret or a chip on our shoulders or are pariahs. Rather, my objective is to defend the imperative of welcoming diverse backgrounds into academic philosophy. Our personal experiences are valuable for refining



philosophical research agendas and challenging status quo perceptions of intelligence and prestige. The profession is lucky to have us: we foster its growth and hold the promise of its future. I also make some recommendations to guide inclusive practices for students and colleagues.

## I. IN THE BEGINNING

I graduated from a public high school in NYC a month before I turned sixteen years old. I was the only one of my friends to graduate and resigned myself to being “the smart one” among a close-knit circle of drug addicts, musicians, and autobody mechanics—some who embodied all three identities at once—but all of whom lived and worked on Coney Island Avenue in the southern most coastline of Brooklyn, New York. We drifted for about a year. After a particularly bad night out, I woke up alone in a stranger’s apartment. He had pink hair and tattoos and walked me to the train station. As we walked, I felt a wave of gratitude, my eyes welling. I somehow sensed that he had not touched me while I was blacked out. As the train climbed its elevated tracks, I watched the morning sun pour into the faces of the women beside me on the train. I wanted more than anything to be a little more like them. They had somewhere to go. They were busy and dignified in the life they were building for themselves; however modest, it was theirs. Above all, I wanted my body, I wanted my mind. I decided that morning that I would get to college, one way or another. And so, the weird gratitude to a stranger for not violating me in the context of a functional homelessness that would last into my early twenties was the impetus for my philosophical studies.

I was in and out of my mother’s home in my late teens, before I left for good after we lost our home to the housing market crash during which over nine million American families lost their homes from 2006 to 2014.<sup>1</sup> I took one of two paths available to most women from my neighborhood of Slavic and Central Asian extraction: sex work or domestic work. Because I figured I had some kind of skillset in the latter department, I became a live-in nanny for a *philosophy professor*, of all people. A stark representation of the realities of who I was and of where I wanted to be and might yet still go. But even if I couldn’t believe it then, I was already on my way.

For me, poverty was an immense feeling of aloneness. A kind of drifting into a cosmic void, like being lowered into a sensory deprivation tank. The future, at best, is a promise that won’t be kept and that you don’t believe in anyway. At worst, it’s a threat. Most days you don’t feel anything. Not knowing what to do with one’s own body—that my physical body was a burden to bear, finding a place for it to sleep, eat, pass the hours of the day and night, safely. It wasn’t the condition of my existence, but a stubborn, ever-present obstacle. An obstacle that in Hunter College I assailed by staying in the library until it closed. I filled every research and editorial opportunity in the philosophy department until the chair (and longtime beloved mentor Frank Kirkland) gave me a key to an office. Once I walked out of a local supermarket with an entire “party-size” tray of shrimp cocktail for an end-of-semester class party. The instructor had asked us to bring “snacks.” I probably could’ve just brought nothing but didn’t want to be outed

as poor. She was a harbinger of all those to come who would unintentionally exacerbate my insecurity before—and arrogant disdain for—those who were better off. It illustrated how much one person has to sacrifice for what someone else can take for granted.

My formative experiences reflected in my philosophical studies by forming a constructive outlet for my anger. With philosophy, I had my first chance to reflect on my life, a tightly wound knot of bad memories to which I had become numb. Even if anger predominated, an entire range of feelings returned to me as I uncoiled memories and used them to sustain my focus to study ethics and politics. I found the concepts to make sense of my experiences. I formed a strong voice and a sense of self. I became *passionate*. I had a way to understand and condemn the world. Even if I couldn’t change my immediate circumstances, at least I could explain why my anger was justified. And for that I will always be grateful to and love philosophy.

My anger has now mostly dimmed. The further in time and space that I move away from my past and my hometown, respectively, the less my memories hold my attention. I get scared sometimes that I will forget, get comfortable and complacent. Yet just as falling in love makes you want to be a better person, my love for philosophy has, with time, driven me to rise above myself. It is important for me to hold onto the parts of myself that had inspired my philosophical imagination. But it’s just as important to me to learn to see the world from the perspective of others who can complete and refine my philosophical imagination. For there are even greater sacrifices so many are forced to make for the privileges I can take for granted in the profession and in the world at large. Though my own experiences have primed me to empathize with others, the firsthand experience of hardship is *absolutely not necessary* to stand in compassionate solidarity with others and to appreciate their perspective and advocate—and even sacrifice—on *their* behalf.

And so, I don’t want to forget my own memories. I also don’t want to forget what Toni Morrison in *Beloved* describes as “rememories” that belong to somebody else and that never happened to me:

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.”

“Can other people see it?” asked Denver.

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you will be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think



it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you."<sup>2</sup>

Morrison suggests that some memories of hardship are so acute and so neglected that they become "rememories." They become something like orphaned memories, outside of received histories and day-to-day conversations, and they linger after the persons who experienced them firsthand are gone. Morrison suggests that it should be the burden of the world to bear rememories and to change the institutional structures that had generated them in the first place. In other words, orphaned memories should eventually find a home in a discursive community. What is more, even if we continue to ignore rememories, they will remain palpable enough that we will "bump" into them. But for philosophers, of course, the goal is not to "bump" into that which holds ethical significance, like hands groping in the dark: it is to mediate, build, and invite community. We just need to figure out how to.

In a collection of essays published in 2019 shortly before her death, *The Source of Self-Regard*, Morrison discusses drawing on slave narratives in her research for her exquisite novel *Beloved*. Received narratives of American history had elided the black historical perspective on slavery. Morrison pieces together what was left unsaid in US history books written by whites to uphold white-power regimes for centuries. She looks to enslaved persons' own accounts of what had happened to them. Her work is the site of a "pitched battle between remembering and forgetting."<sup>3</sup> She notes that the notion of rememory confronts an unspoken past and the untold experiences of hardship that it conceals in a new way: it amounts to "the effort to remember and *not to know*."<sup>4</sup> What I take Morrison to mean here is that "knowing" is an open-ended, incomplete, and imperfect process. She cannot "know" the personal experience of slavery in the sense that the mechanisms for constructing knowledge are profoundly unreliable. However, without amounting to "knowledge," her fictionalized representations honor the ethical demands of memory. They partially fill in the "truth" to represent the millions of enslaved persons who never had a chance to speak for themselves and who perished nameless and forgotten in the Middle Passage and on plantations.

## II. RECOMMENDATIONS

Morrison's notion of "rememory" is a useful normative signpost for thinking about the ethics of inclusion that can guide the redistribution of power and prestige in academic philosophy. In order to build inclusive discursive communities, we must accept that the missing pieces of our collective knowledge require an ever-expanding circle of interlocutors whom we have historically excluded as credible epistemic agents. In a real sense, our profession does not "know" and will never "know" the rememory of those it seeks to welcome. But it must nevertheless attempt

to carry that epistemic weight anyway. That is a tall order for a profession that resists mitigating the illicit authority of those who hold *de facto* power and privilege. And yet it should be the responsibility of the profession to ease the burden—and even sacrifice—for those it nominally seeks to welcome.

In my view, following Morrison, the ethics of inclusion involves cultivating both deliberative reciprocity and an inclination to foreground the voices of the excluded. On the one hand, if we expect to be heard, we must reciprocate, in return, an open disposition to listen and to engage in good faith. That is, treat others like real philosophers. Read their work. Disagree in meaningful and helpful ways. And above all: read and assign in syllabi historically excluded voices and canonical figures. As a Du Bois scholar, I can't say how many times I've been on a panel with commentators who preface their remarks, "Never read Du Bois, but skimmed *Souls* on the flight over—interesting stuff!" Or, "It seems to me that you're making a mountain out of a molehill—there's just not enough 'there there' in his writings." I can't imagine someone on a Kant panel making similar claims about Kant's worst and most notorious writings, such as his lectures on anthropology and geography.

On the other hand, the project of building inclusive discursive practices is even more demanding than merely cultivating genuine deliberative reciprocity. It asks us to foreground the persons excluded by our profession as holding the promise of its future development. As such, we must accept that those who finished public or community colleges, or who were the first in their family to graduate high school and go to college, or enter the middle class are the potential future leaders of the profession. They too are philosophical powerhouses to whom we owe our respect and gratitude for bothering with a profession that for too long and for no good reason has made no room for them. I have been lucky enough to teach in public universities for many years now. I enter my classroom with all the seriousness that my students—who tend to be socioeconomically and racially diverse—hold the key to what our discipline could one day become. We must attend to the needs of a diverse student body not just for the sake of inclusion, but for the sake of the potential vibrancy of philosophy itself. Moreover, we owe our students as a matter of moral respect and justice the opportunity to pursue their chosen profession with dignity. Without accepting these claims about the ethics of inclusion, I believe that it will be difficult to garner the collective will to enact the recommendations I outline below.

*Early mentoring.* First, it is vital to start cultivating early informal support networks for students, with a special focus on teaching philosophy effectively to undergraduates. For good reasons, we tend to focus on our graduate students in whose intellectual development we are directly invested. Yet there are serious limitations to this approach. Being admitted into a competitive graduate school often signifies that a student has already scaled a formidable obstacle that many talented but poorer students cannot scale on their own. Unfortunately, admission into graduate philosophy programs often requires an undergraduate degree from some of the most expensive colleges in the world. For

example, as my alma mater The Graduate Center, CUNY moves up in rank, admissions committees draw more seldomly on the student body that CUNY is supposed to serve: students like me who attended New York City public schools and CUNY colleges. I have found the same trend in large public research universities across the country.

I suggest we start modelling informal support networks at the undergraduate level that we'd like to see grow in the profession. At least in my case, effective mentoring entailed long mentoring relationships that kept me on track, alerted me to opportunities, and advocated for me when I felt like I was losing ground in difficult circumstances. Just to have someone who is ready to talk philosophy—I mean to *really get into it*—was extremely dignifying when I was losing heart. In order to build these kinds of transformative mentoring relationships, potential mentors must earn students' trust and this takes time. Instead, we often show a weird formal distance from our undergraduate students that leads the more vulnerable to turn away from philosophy because they intuit that few will be there for them when they will need it most. Moreover, it is of course vital to continue nurturing students' development once they enter graduate school.

*Monetary Support.* Access to resources for economically disadvantaged students is perhaps most helpful of all. Usually, the less a student has, the more likely they will work while in college. Some students raise children or take care of family members, particularly in public colleges. The discrepancies in pay faced by women, people of color, and women of color in particular are well known. The attack on FAFSA, Pell, and TAP student aid programs further burdens an already cash-strapped student body reeling from the effects of a string of economic crises. Federal and state subsidies for financing needy students' college degrees are being depleted by rightwing profiteers. The cost of a college degree is prohibitive, even in a public university system such as CUNY, which was free until 1976.<sup>5</sup> The escalating costs of higher education tightly knits whiteness, power, and prestige, which then seeps into the culture and material reality of academic philosophy. Albeit a small step in the right direction, in my experience, the commitment of a philosophy department to hire research or editorial assistants can provide students with much needed cash and help foster the mentoring relationships that are vital for their long-term success. Even the rare monetary essay prizes for majors can go a long way. For the solidly middle class, it is easy to overlook the difference an extra \$300 or \$500 can make for a student living paycheck-to-paycheck. My mentors also nominated me, again and again, for grants and national awards when I lacked the cultural capital to discover them on my own. Finally, full-time and tenured faculty should consider subsidizing departmental conference travel funds for undergraduate and graduate students, as well as co-writing talks with students, who can then begin accessing our professional networks.

*The politics of public schooling.* What is more, inequalities in academic philosophy reflect the staggering inequalities not only in higher education but at schooling at the pre-K and K-12 levels across the US. The under-resourcing of public schools disproportionately impacts communities

of color and black and brown students. Recently, public school students in the worst performing high schools in Detroit won a class-action lawsuit against the state of Michigan because they graduated high school unable to read.<sup>6</sup> *The New York Times* reports:

The ruling came in response to a class-action lawsuit filed by a group of Detroit public school students that cited a litany of severe deficiencies: Rodent-infested schools. Unqualified and absentee teachers. Physics classes given only biology textbooks. "Advanced" high school reading groups working at the fourth-grade level.

[. . .] The overwhelming majority of students in the Detroit public schools are black or Hispanic and come from low-income families. Judge Clay noted that through the nation's history, white people have repeatedly withheld education to deny political power to African-Americans and others, most notably under slavery and segregation.<sup>7</sup>

A federal court ruled that Americans have the constitutional right to literacy, without which they are unable to participate in democratic public life. The ruling in the Detroit case occurred in April 2020. It follows class-action lawsuits filed by former public school students in New Hampshire and California. *Note:* This trend is the national context of debates about the ethics of inclusion in academic philosophy.

Obviously poor educational outcomes in high school leave students unprepared for college. It also prohibits economically disadvantaged students from pursuing any profession at all and locks them into grinding, soul-crushing poverty. If we are serious about welcoming diverse backgrounds into academic philosophy, we must contextualize the inequalities in our profession in the light of the grossly unequal access to a quality higher education and public schooling at all levels. In other words, our commitment to inclusion cannot be myopic. It ultimately entails getting involved in messy political debates that seem *prima facie* unrelated. As a profession, we *must* defend public schools, as well as affordable—heck, free!—college education as an essential public good.

Moreover, given extreme structural inequalities, our most vulnerable students and their families also require quality, publicly funded childcare, fair compensation for their labor, health care, adequate shelter and nutritious food, resources without which focusing on one's studies takes a herculean effort—the kind of effort that drives the heroines of epic poems to battle sea monsters and pagan gods. To be blunt, the profession needs a clear progressive politics. Even if there is reasonable disagreement about which variety of a socialist or liberal democracy best exemplifies justice, there must be a consensus about the crucial importance of public schools and the universal satisfaction of basic needs for all children, including our historically excluded, brilliant, and hardworking philosophy students.

Reflecting on post-WWII Germany, Hannah Arendt observes that "There are more than a few people, especially among the cultural elite, who still publicly regret the fact that

Germany sent Einstein packing, without realizing that it was a much greater crime to kill little Hans Cohn from around the corner, even though he was no genius.”<sup>8</sup> In our effort to build an inclusive community in academic philosophy, we must commit to the right of all children to live dignified and flourishing lives, with access to quality public schools at all levels and basic resources, regardless of the beneficial effect it will have downstream on enriching academic philosophy, which it inevitably will. At the very least, it cannot remain a matter of a random draw that a child is fated to attend a local public school district that will teach her how to read. Whatever obstacles I faced, I am somehow left feeling lucky. In fact, I am in awe of my good fortune that even as I drifted after high school, reading was my first love, one that would make it so sweet and empowering to later welcome philosophy into my life.

#### NOTES

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## Knowing What to Order at the Conference Dinner

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Here’s a story about a familiar scene. A group of philosophers in a restaurant at the end-of-the-first-day conference dinner. One of them, I notice, is clearly uncomfortable. During earlier sessions, they’d been confident and cheerful. Now, they’re anxious and quiet. Sitting by them, I asked if they were okay. Hesitantly, they explained they’d never eaten at a restaurant before. Everything about the experience was unfamiliar—the place was pulsing with uncertainties. Where to sit. Who the water on the table is for. Whether you ask to get up and go to the bathroom. How long the meal lasts. When you pay. Whether there are speeches.

Alongside this uncertainty about the rules and format of the evening, the philosopher was deeply struck by how *obviously comfortable* everyone else seemed. Folks

were relaxed—jackets off, pouring wine, laughing away at favourite stories and old jokes. Everyone else, they said, was so obviously at home in this environment. They were utterly competent in all these little actions—clearly rehearsed in hailing a waiter, perusing a menu, knowing which glass was theirs. Speaking phenomenologically, what struck the philosopher was that everyone else was embedded in a space of possibilities they were able to navigate with unruffled spontaneity. It was an environment in which they felt *at home*. By contrast, the philosopher lamented, they lacked the most elementary knowledge and understanding. How do you call a waiter? What can I ask them for? Is there a charge if I ask for more water?

I offered to help, and, after a pause, they held out their menu to me.

“What do I order?”

That question totally threw me. I was so familiar with restaurants; it hadn’t occurred to me someone might not know that you can *choose* what you *like*. My parents took my sister and I to restaurants when we were little. Since we couldn’t always afford holidays, it was one way to give us nice experiences my parents had never had. None of them were Michelin-star places—my post-industrial hometown had none of those. But I knew enough to know how to act in restaurants. I’d read a menu, asked my parents to explain the words, and seen people picking out their glass from the array of options. I knew that specials are usually pricier, knew how to act when someone was serving me, knew not to stack and carry the plates at the end of the meal. By contrast, said the philosopher, they’d never even *entered* a restaurant.

When they asked what they should order, I realised they’d assumed that there was an item they were supposed to select—as if all conferences attendees had been *assigned* a meal. They thought they’d missed that bit of information (was it in the conference pack?) and were feeling that hot fear of not knowing what to say, like an actor forgetting their lines. It wasn’t clear to them that they could choose anything they liked. Obviously, once I explained, things became tougher in a different way. Your choices depend on your wallet. Moreover, you need to find some dish you understood enough to be confident in choosing. Like many restaurants selected for conference dinners, this one was fancy—the cheapest main was about twenty dollars and the mark-up on drinks was steep.

Unfortunately, the rest of the table went for three-courses—which, I explained, meant starter, mains, and a dessert. Automatically totting up prices, the philosopher was then aghast when I warned that there was the risk of someone suggesting splitting the bill “equally.” Their carefully constructed \$27.85 bill could inflate into a cross-subsidising \$100 bill. (Luckily, the conference organisers later passed around to advise against splitting—a crucial intervention, since power dynamics make it hard to resist by saying, “Actually, could we not. . .”)

I tell this story because, a few days later, on returning home, I happened to tell it to a colleague.

They burst out laughing.

“Ha ha ha! How can you not know how to order at a restaurant!”

Years later, I’m still struck by the stupidity of this statement. Stupid in the sense of a culpable failure to exercise one’s intelligence. For a start, it’s perfectly obvious why a person might not know the myriad norms, rules, and micropractices relevant to restaurants. You may be from a family too poor to enjoy the luxury of paying professionals to prepare and serve you food. You may have always lived in socioeconomically impoverished areas that don’t have restaurants. You may not have the luxury of regarding food as an opportunity for outsourcing your culinary labour and enjoying an evening of recreational consumption. If you’re poor, you wait tables, you don’t sit at them.

Since none of these possibilities is difficult to generate intellectually, my colleague’s failure lay somewhere else. If stupidity is a culpable failure to exercise one’s intelligence, then we ought to ask what *motivates* those failures. Some obvious candidates are the epistemic limitations built into the structured pathways of experience and activity characteristic of socially and materially privileged people. From my colleague’s perspective, those possibilities really were just *possibilities*—abstract options, generated by imagination, not drawn from painful memory.

If my colleague’s earlier life afforded the consistent possibility of fun meals out, that’s a good thing. From experience, I know that being poor and hungry *sucks*, not an experience that I’d wish on anyone. But that sets up the challenge—to maintain an empathic understanding of realities of life that lie outside the particular course of one’s own experience, to resist the stupidification that poverty of experience breeds, to constantly act to resist the ossifying patterns of obliviousness to the heterogeneity of human life sustained by one’s privileges. It is the challenge—moral as much as epistemic—to inhabit a particular style of life without it gradually narrowing our receptivity to other kinds of life, to the wider realities of how our fellow humans live, or try to. It’s easy for our imaginations to become dampened, leading to contemptuous snorts of laughter at the fumbling uncertainties of others. (The Britpop band, Pulp, put it well in their song “Common People,” which describes a wealthy girl who “wants to live like common people.” Upon being taken to a supermarket, “I said ‘Pretend you’ve got no money’ / She just laughed and said, ‘You’re so funny’”). It may seem hard to imagine someone getting to their twenties without having eaten in a restaurant—but it’s not, really.

Back to the philosopher in the restaurant. I didn’t laugh at their uncertainty and their ignorance because, thanks to the forethought and determination of my parents, I’d had some experience of restaurants. They were poor for a lot of my early life, but hid it very well. Even now, the economic precarity that structured my earlier life remains well-concealed, as I half-remember bags of ‘hand-me-downs’ and assurances on Christmas Day that my parents spent the same amount on my sister and I. Such experiences help me do the work to avoid the fault of that colleague

who guffawed at the sad ignorance of someone who didn’t know how *menus* work.

Obviously, we can make it easier for philosophers to exercise their intelligence and imagination, not least diversifying our disciplinary demographics. If departments are staffed by those from wealthier backgrounds, that sustains expectations about what sorts of social experiences and activities can be taken as the norm. A wine reception—never one with beers. A conference dinner at a smart restaurant—never something informal in someone’s home. Upon describing a typical conference dinner to a friend, they said it’d be more fun to have a few beers in someone’s garden with homecooked food. He regarded visits to restaurants as complexly demanding trials, course after course of class-coded challenges with constant risk of subtle normative censure.

I’m not urging abandonment of the swanky conference dinner, nor suggesting first-generation philosophers from socioeconomically underprivileged backgrounds are incapable of enjoying them and mastering their nuances. That would be invidious snobbery, of a sort liable to mutate into horrible contemptuousness. What can help, though, are changes to our social practices in specific contexts like restaurants. Some of the changes are obvious. Don’t choose pricier restaurants, unless you have budget to pay for all the attendees (and beware well-meant systems that require people to reveal that they need financial assistance). Sometimes, there are collegial delegates who offer to subsidise the unfunded and underfunded. That’s a nice practice, albeit too dependent on the generosity of attendees to be any real solution. Proscribe the practice of ‘splitting the bill’, which really forces the involuntarily abstemious to subsidise those who enjoyed three courses and expensive wine. Choose restaurants that offer special deals—“\$30 dollars for two courses if you order between 5 and 7!” If they don’t, try to negotiate a deal, or else take your fifty-person party elsewhere.

Crucially, communicate all these costs to attendees in advance. Some will have to save up in advance for conferences. Being told three months in advance that the conference dinner will cost thirty dollars total including your first drink helps them to budget. Moreover, if you’re the organiser, provide information on hidden costs, like the tip at the restaurant and the cost of a taxi: when I was a postgrad, my heart sank when someone suggested sharing a taxi, since I could never afford one, unless I gave up on having an alcoholic drink over dinner. If you can, cover costs of taxis to and from the restaurant. Provide information on public transport—too many conference organisers forget about buses. Conference packs, in my experience, rarely include bus schedules. If you’re a financially privileged delegate, consider inviting those who need a ride to join your taxi. Be clear you’re not expecting them to chip in for the fare.

A conference dinner at a restaurant represents a whole structure of socially, culturally, and materially complicated relationships. Some people are comfortable in those structures, since they’ll be as effortlessly able to pay the bill as navigate the menu. They’ll have a lovely evening. But for



others, those structures impose anxiety, uncertainty, and a bill that can't be allayed with a wave of a credit card or the keeping of receipts for reimbursement—a privilege that can also be co-opted, of course, by delegates inclined to support their fellow diners who use their financial privileges to help others. And remember that some can't afford the upfront costs in the way assumed by the reimbursement model.

Some of this is the work of the organiser, some is the work of the attendees. Some of the work is rewarding. Many enjoy their generosity and public acts of magnanimity. Some of the work is dull or demanding. Some delegates get grumpy if told they can't water down their own bill. Arranging taxis is more work than just expecting people to call an Uber. Telephoning the restaurant to negotiate a deal is more work than not. But taking such measures are ways of trying to make the social and financial experience of a conference easier for low-income and first-generation philosophers—indeed, for anyone whose experiences and resources don't automatically make a conference dinner the chilled, enjoyable experience it is for so many. That young philosopher had a rough time at that restaurant. A lot of their discomfort could have been allayed—but not by someone, like my colleague, inclined to laugh at the very idea of not knowing how a *restaurant* works.

A conference dinner at a restaurant is a good place for considering the interactions of class, race, economic privilege, professional comportment, and the culturally coded forms of sophistication that have been built into the discipline. Much needs to be changed and a really good place to start is by appreciating these realities—to grasp that when you're happily sitting choosing a starter from the menu, the person sitting opposite may be wondering if the acute uncertainty they're feeling at that moment means they chose the wrong profession.

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## *Epistemic Shame as a First-Generation Scholar*

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Once, during my time as a graduate student at Cornell University, I was reading in its iconic "Big Red Barn" when a few undergraduate students sat down at the table beside me. They were discussing the various ways their parents had protected them from bits of information that were deemed *too burdensome for them to bear* as busy college students. The examples ranged. One family hid a large-scale home renovation so their child would not worry about their life without a fully functional kitchen. Another set of parents kept the fact that their child's ex-partner had moved on to another while the child was away in Ithaca. The students shared their feelings about these omissions with humor and lightheartedness. The overall mood seemed to be one of mild annoyance, colored with understanding. I gathered my book and set off for my shared TA office down the hill. My mind veered towards the question, "What is *my* family keeping from me?"

Three years prior, when I left Barrio Hollywood in Tucson, AZ for New York state, I knew there would be information kept from me. I was leaving at the onset of big things in my family: my parents took on a restructuring of debt earlier that year and each of my three younger siblings welcomed their first child, which I knew would raise financial and emotional stress given that my siblings ranged in age from 19 to 23 and only two of them had a high school degree. Although it was safe to assume that difficulties similar to the ones we faced while I was growing up would arise, weekend calls regularly failed to mention those things. My family did not divulge their worries about the cost of childcare. They did not discuss their difficulty getting the correct amount of peanut butter through WIC (i.e., Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), the status of my parents' bankruptcy, whether there were any broken-down vehicles, whether any of my siblings were stuck waiting for public transit in the scorching Southwest sun while carrying a cranky toddler, or anything like that. When I asked how things were on those fronts, the topic quickly changed. On that short walk, I began to identify what I was feeling by the omissions I knew were present in my life: *shame*. I now take this experience to be one of *epistemic shame*.

Here, I sketch a short rationale for this claim. I briefly summarize recent accounts of "epistemic shame," highlighting two features of them: (1) epistemic shame is an affective state that necessarily has a false belief as its object and (2) the intensity of an experience of epistemic shame is a function of the judgments other people make about one for holding a false belief. I suggest that the experience of epistemic shame described above is some motivation to reject both (1) and (2). As I hope to show, epistemic shame does not require a false belief as its object. Nor does it require one to hold any specific belief at all. Epistemic shame may occur when any feature of one's epistemic life is shameful. This is because holding true beliefs is not the only quality one might strive for in an epistemic life. Here, I highlight how sometimes one may strive to share epistemic burdens with those they love because doing so is the basis upon which meaningful bonds with them are sown and strengthened. When one fails to do this, an experience of epistemic shame may follow. Further, I show that the intensity of one's feeling of epistemic shame can also be a function of the importance one places on certain features of their epistemic life. It is not always the case that external observers influence how this epistemic emotion is felt.

Current work in philosophy and psychology takes epistemic shame to be the shame that one feels as a result of holding a belief that leads to contradiction or holding a false belief. Of course, the specifics are put forth using different theoretical tools and concepts special to the relevant disciplines. For instance, Ancient Greek theorist Laura Candiotto offers an account of epistemic shame based on the role it played in the process of belief purification in Plato's Socratic dialogues. Candiotto shows that shame, captured by the Greek terms *aidôs* and sometimes *aischynê*, was an affective state that some of Socrates's interlocutors would enter upon finding themselves in the unpleasant state of *aporia* (i.e., finding themselves lost



or without a path forward towards knowledge). However unpleasant, the result of discovering that one of their own beliefs lead to contradiction, and the shameful feeling following, Socrates's elenchus were necessary components of improving one's beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Candiottto writes,

This feeling of inferiority is a prerequisite for purification. Shame was a virtue, the one that allows an agent to recognize their inadequacy, and through it to purify them from wrong behaviors—from those wrong behaviors that are false beliefs according to the Socratic tradition—and, thus, to activate a process of purification.<sup>2</sup>

That is, to experience epistemic shame one must hold a false belief and believe that one is an inferior thinker when compared to others. These beliefs are necessary prerequisites for one to feel motivated to improve their beliefs. Furthermore, Candiottto notes that the degree of shame one feels as a result of being brought into a state of *aporia* from one's own beliefs is often a function of other people's judgments.

Specifically, Candiottto notes that the level to which one feels ashamed for their false beliefs differs across group-facilitated processes of belief improvement (e.g., discussion-based inquiry) and individual processes (e.g., private meditation). They write, "[...] group *aporetic* states, described as the social procedure of belief-purification, may be more painful than the recognition of our faults while ruminating alone [...] they unmask the agent's inadequacy to the other members of the group that are evaluating the agent's beliefs [...]"<sup>3</sup>

In psychology, Elisabeth Vogl et al. (2019) treat epistemic shame this way as well. They liken it to an achievement emotion. Achievement emotions are those arising as a result of some agent's partaking in an action at which they can fail or succeed. Two prototypical achievement emotions are pride and shame. Put simply, many psychologists think that we tend to feel prideful when we win and shameful when we lose. The epistemic variants would be emotional states arising when one learns whether or not one has achieved true belief or succeeded at some cognitive task, like correctly answering a math question.<sup>4</sup>

In the above accounts, we get a sense that epistemic shame is an emotion arising in someone as a result of holding a belief that is false. Simply put, an experience of epistemic shame has a belief as its object. However, there are many features of our epistemic lives that may give rise to an experience of epistemic shame. Some examples include the following.

In addition to one caring about holding true beliefs, one may care about the way one arrives at their beliefs. For example, one may strive to have beliefs that do not depend on epistemic practices which are prejudicial or biased in a harmful way. One may also care about having beliefs that are not arrived at on a whim, for example, by a lucky guess. Further, in addition to holding true beliefs, one may care whether they have certain skills that are important to their cultural identity. For example, in the English-Only Latinx

community (i.e., the community of Latinx individuals who speak English only) some report shame for not knowing how to speak Spanish.<sup>5</sup> Rightfully or wrongfully, the way beliefs might make us feel, the questions or doubts that beliefs might raise in us about our belief gathering practices, and the connections they help us form with the people around us, are all things we care about as epistemic agents.<sup>6</sup> In addition to whether the content of a belief is true, any of these features of our epistemic life can inspire epistemic pride and epistemic shame in us.

Specifically, my experience of epistemic shame (possibly one shared by many first-generation scholars whose families tried to support their focus on education in similar ways) illustrates how this form of shame can result not from having a false belief, but from lacking certain beliefs altogether. In this case, a state of lacking beliefs refers to those instances in which an epistemic agent has some reason to believe there is information out there that to which agent could have access (information about which they could form beliefs), but does not. As epistemic agents we are constantly in a state of lacking beliefs in this way. A relatable example of this is the state we are in while reading a novel. Prior to completing a novel, we understand it has an ending that is available to us, but we do not yet know what it is, nor do we have beliefs about it. One might wonder what makes this a shame-inducing state. After all, how is this state interestingly distinct from the state we default to after the simple acknowledgment that there are an infinite number of possible beliefs we lack at any moment?

I have come to believe that there are some beliefs I think I ought to have because carrying the burden of these beliefs is an ingrained component of my identity. Moreover, in some cases, sharing the burden of certain beliefs with other people is the way in which bonds with those people are sown and sustained. In part, this is because without carrying those burdens, I am powerless to alleviate the circumstances which give rise to these beliefs. Further, I am powerless to help my loved ones cope with the emotional realities these beliefs bring them, like worry, stress, or their own shame for their circumstances. By not sharing the load of those beliefs from which my family was protecting me, I was letting myself down on some level. That is what was shameful. I believe I ought to carry some of the mental weight that they do. I believe I ought to share in it because if I don't, my identity and my purpose have ventured too far away from them.

My family and my roots in Tucson have been and continue to be a huge motivator in continuing my scholarship; but the connections between these two aspects of my life felt impossible in my first three years of grad school. The only connection I could feel at first was one of using my past as a source of inspiration. Every time the vulnerable process of submitting work was too immense, I would quickly think back to the days when my dad would bring all four of us kids to his weekend construction jobs and have us help smooth grout in cracks between terra-cotta bricks and hold rebar steady while he checked foundations for levelness. The work of my people is a different form of hard work. They dug holes in 90-degree weather to subsidize my education in any way they could. They cleaned houses and designed landscaping so I could have a bike to get to my classes

and textbooks about topics like unrestricted quantification. When I thought back to that, I could find inspiration to dig deeper and try to be confident in my work (although, this is still a huge challenge). It was not until the second year of my PhD program when I realized that the burdensome beliefs I felt shame for not having might actually matter in a philosophical sense.

Cornell lucked out when, during my second year of grad school, a young professor joined our department and taught (what I believe to be) one of the first courses in non-ideal theory (besides our feminist philosophy course). Simultaneously, a close friend and I started a chapter of Minorities and Philosophy (MAP) at Cornell. All of a sudden, the world of philosophy looked really different to me. Philosophy's distance to those real-life worries experienced by people like my family members felt a bit shorter.

The epistemic shame I had for escaping burdensome beliefs began to look more like the kind of shame anyone who cares about understanding good action, good character, and justice ought to feel on some level. I was finally learning that in writing for all, many of the ideal theorists I had read through the years were failing by their own estimation in the same ways I was. They were trying to answer these important questions about the role of a human being in supporting goodness and justice, but for some reason they were not considering the burden of the practical injustices and misfortunes that these answers depend on. They were simply avoiding these possible beliefs that were burdensome in the name of ideal theory. They were setting them aside for the sake of philosophical ease. I would not do that anymore. I decided to share the epistemic burdens with my family, to relate to them in this important way. I would push (with a "gently obnoxious" approach, as my sister describes it) for the full picture and try to help. I would no longer allow burdensome beliefs to be omitted from me.

This reflection illustrates reasons to reject both features of the current accounts of epistemic shame. First, one can feel epistemic shame because of beliefs they lack and the avoidance of the burdens those beliefs might give rise to (i.e., not merely because they hold a false belief). In my case, these were burdens I found important to bear because doing so felt like part of my identity and because bearing these burdens had instrumental value. To some extent, they opened a path to help when I could and they added an element to my philosophical thinking that I found to be valuable. Further, these burdens were part of the glue securing my familiar bonds. It is now the case that I can hold their hands through the ebbs and flows of life, even if I live far away. That is, epistemic shame led me to be a better epistemic agent on some level. This happens to reflect the upshot of epistemic shame described by both Candiotto and Vogl et al. Both think that epistemic shame might lead to belief revision. Candiotto puts it in the following way: "Through the challenges of others, an epistemic agent may feel ashamed for their epistemic errors and, thus, have the desire to overcome this unpleasant situation through epistemic purification."<sup>7</sup> Vogl et al. agree to some extent, while also noting several studies that show shame to have a variable effect on how motivated someone is

to improve at the cognitive tasks that triggered with their shame.<sup>8</sup> Regardless, we can be certain that it is possible for experiences of epistemic shame unrelated to the holding of a false belief (and the judgment of others) to also lead to better belief gathering processes. For example, my own experience shows that I pushed to stop the omissions. I take that to be an improvement in my belief system even if it is not the most comfortable one. Sometimes we avoid information that would be too painful for us to bear for the sake of comfort and ease. If, as epistemic agents we think our goal ought to be to hold true beliefs about the world, prioritizing such comfort may sometimes undermine it. It is in this trivial sense that I take epistemic shame to have led me to improvement, the obtaining of a truer, more authentic understanding of my loved ones' lives.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the above reflection shows how epistemic shame seems possible when the only judgment at play (or the most pressing) is one's own. This is not in contradiction with the idea that the degree to which one feels epistemic shame depends on what their society values. It is just to say that the degree to which one experiences it may be a function of one's own priorities in their epistemic life. I could not imagine living a truthful and fulfilling life as a scholar and not sharing the epistemic burdens of my family. I cannot imagine being fulfilled by housing all of these creative and critical thinking skills only to bust them out for things like derivations (no matter how fun). On the contrary, when I do have the opportunity to work with them to develop solutions, help them write resumes, ask for raises, etc. it gives me a sense of worth that I just would not have otherwise. In lacking beliefs and their associated burdens, I was failing on my own standards for my epistemic life, not anyone else's. I take it as an important component of my epistemic life that some of my time is spent solving problems with those I care about. Admittedly, this is a luxury that not every first-generation or low-income philosopher has. It is certainly one I did not enjoy as a graduate student.

The burden of these beliefs brought its own set of challenges then as it does now. As a graduate student on a fixed income and far away from Arizona, helping was not nearly as achievable as I wished it to be. I was not around to babysit my nephews and niece, so that my siblings could go on job interviews for better-paying job opportunities. I was unable to send money to fix vehicles or pay unexpected medical bills. I often wished I was in their town so I could give rides to people when they needed it, or host dinners and just hug them to raise their spirits when times were tough. Uncovering this cavern of beliefs about my family's lives and challenges raised huge demands on my emotional well-being. It colored every event that has happened to me during my journey in academia. Each failed attempt to get a job or an opportunity closer to them felt like a personal blow, a failed attempt to be able to share the load. As a professor, this is still the case. I am in a better position to help, but I still live far away. I lived and still live in a mild state of guilt, despite my family's efforts to convince me that this guilt is baseless. Yet, I do feel a sense of connectedness with them that I just would not have staying in dark. My epistemic shame was replaced with these burdens, but the bonds we are sustaining by sharing them fills me with so much more purpose and

meaning. I am still a part of them and they are a part of me and a part of my philosophical life.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### NOTES

1. Laura Candiotti, "The Virtues of Epistemic Shame in Critical Dialogue," 76–78.
2. Ibid., 77.
3. Ibid., 79. Here Candiotti also argues that group judgment and esteem for one as a thinker can shape how likely it is that the experience of epistemic shame triggers belief revision. Partially because in groups where true belief is valued there will be considerable pressure to revise. Limited space prevents me from discussing the full account and upshots of epistemic shame in this paragraph.
4. Reinhard Pekrun, "Control-value Theory: A Social-cognitive Approach to Achievement Emotions"; Elisabeth Vogl et al., "Surprised–Curious–Confused: Epistemic Emotions and Knowledge Exploration."
5. P. Juarez & Chavarria, C. & Medina, D., 2017; Older, D.
6. In another work, I show how examples of shame for not knowing how to speak Spanish also motivate rejecting an account of epistemic shame that necessarily requires a false belief as its object. There, my claim is that one gains and fosters connections with their loved ones and culture through shared language and this is one way in which lacking skills or knowledge-how can produce shame in the same way that a false belief can (Munguia, forthcoming).
7. Candiotti, "The Virtues of Epistemic Shame in Critical Dialogue," 78.
8. Vogl et al., "Surprised–Curious–Confused," 627.
9. Of course, there are different theoretical takes on how one ought to be as a belief gatherer. So, this may also be understood in a different epistemological framework (one that is not necessarily consequentialist and hyper-focused on landing on true beliefs, but also maybe a virtue epistemology that prioritizes openness to information, considering objections to one's beliefs, an active pursuit of evidence for one's beliefs etc.). However, one spins this, no theory necessarily places our own emotional comforts on a pedestal above these types of features of their epistemology. So, I believe this claim does not necessarily take a stand on whether one ought to adhere to a teleological or consequentialist take on adjudicating the relationship between epistemic agents and truth or true belief.

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## Marginal Disclosures: Sisterhood, Standpoint, Community, and Thriving

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In "A Troubled Peace: Black Women in the Halls of the White Academy," Nellie McKay writes: "To be black and female in the academy has its own particular frustrations because it [the academy] was never intended for us to be here. We are in spaces that have been appropriated for us."<sup>1</sup> Although McKay writes these words in the 60s, specifically about the experiences of African American women, her words apply to many Black women who enter the academy. That is, even though the numbers of Black women professors and scholars are increasing, this change is happening at a rather slow pace. Call for papers (CFPs) such as this one are telling. The continuous calls for Black women to relay their experiences of marginalization are reminders that even though there is color in the ivory tower, we remain "outsiders-within."<sup>2</sup>

The style of this paper follows from Black feminist and womanist thought and takes a conversational format between me (Zinhle ka'Nobuhlaluse) and Ashley Lamarre. These are our reflections from the many intersecting identities that we hold. These identities are not essential to our being, but they have informed how these institutions treat us and those that look like us, hence the importance of sisterly scholarship. Through reflecting about our individual narratives, we hope to highlight the classist, racist, and sexist practices that still suffuse in the academy, in particular, in the United States of America and in South Africa. Additionally, we claim the importance of Black feminist and womanist theoretical and methodological frameworks in critiques of academia's continued marginalization of Black women scholars. Our desire is not to seek empathy or blame, rather we use this reflection in a productive way. A kind of productivity that is articulated by Audre Lorde in "The uses of anger."<sup>3</sup> Lorde explains that "anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies."<sup>4</sup> Black feminism(s) and womanism(s) have informed this desire to unashamedly write from the standpoints that have shaped and will continue to shape our experiences of being Black women and being in the academy.

### I. SISTERHOOD

A good starting point would be to reflect on our decision to write this paper together. When the CFP came out for an APA session on the topic of first-generation and/or low-income philosophers in the academy, I (ka'Nobuhlaluse) asked Lamarre, a peer in my graduate cohort, if she would be interested in collaborating on the presentation on which we base this paper. As the only Black women

in our cohort with some overlapping research interests, I could have readily adopted the mentality that Lamarre and I are naturally in competition for opportunities, given the racial and historical demographics of philosophy and its job market. Instead, I decided this need not be the case. Though we have overlapping intersections and research interests, we are not in competition with each other. We choose to resist this racist heterosexist capitalist neoliberal narrative.

To echo Lorde, the final decision to collaborate with Lamarre came from the assumption that “[w]e are not here as women examining racism in a political and social vacuum. We operate in the teeth of a system for whom racism and sexism [including classism] are primary, established, and necessary props of profit.”<sup>5</sup> It is for this reason that we need to rally together and go beyond bonding over our oppression in order to navigate academia.

Therefore, my request to be in sisterly scholarship with Lamarre was a conscious decision because I treat Black feminist thought as a life philosophy. I intentionally use the word sisterhood instead of collegiality or friendship. ‘Sisterhood’ neatly captures a branch of my feminist standpoint, that is anchored in *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is a normative and moral philosophy that underscores relationality in most Southern African cultures. The ethic is best captured by the Zulu proverb “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.” As a moral theory, *Ubuntu* underscores the ways in which we are relational beings—a relationality that is rooted in mutual recognition: *kobuntu bethu kanye nomlando owabiwe*.

Little did ka’Nobuhlaluse know, her reaching out to me (Lamarre), long before this call, disrupted my solitary and painstaking process of reflecting on my place in graduate school. At the start, these meditations were individualistic and largely obscured by my imposter syndrome—a legitimate form of intellectual self-doubt that can be exacerbated by overlapping marginalized identities.<sup>6</sup> Over time, I recognized that attempting to bury these troubling feelings by isolating myself and developing a practice of overworking did little to alleviate my depleted spirits. Only through the care-filled reallocation of my time to robust dialogues with peers like ka’Nobuhlaluse and my readings of Black feminist scholarship did I begin to heal. This healing meant I felt more prepared, excited, and ready to accomplish my graduate work, while also having an increased investment in the needs and struggles of my peers. Therefore, *tankou yon ayisyèn ki tande bri lanbi a k’ap sonnen*, ka’Nobuhlaluse’s call to co-write with me was music to my ears.

## II. STANDPOINT

Regarding this special issue’s desire to highlight the experience of philosophers who are “outsiders within,” I (Lamarre) want to expound on what inspired this paper’s title. Marginal disclosure, in the case of graduate applications, is the moment in which an applicant attempts to reveal their difference within their “Statement of Purpose.” This voluntary admission of difference precedes the phenotypical encounter through its presence in this application requirement. In the very first lines, in some cases, we reveal the various intersections of our identities.

I want to consider the rippling effects that can arise from this moment of disclosure in graduate applications, but not before exploring why this disclosure occurs in the first place.

For many of us, the practice of marginal disclosure is not merely an early attempt to illustrate our difference, but an intentional gesture to explain how these differences impact our existence. This decision is no coincidence in the “Statement of Purpose.” Instead, this choice to disclose deviation represents two truths moving towards the same goal, successfully making it into the academy *as one truly is, for what academia truly is*. As *one truly is*, denotes a disclosure interested in utter transparency. It does not intend to declare inherent “superiority” in our intersections. Instead, this admission shows that we have experienced our position at those intersections as not only a site of struggle but also as “a source of strength, community, and intellectual development.”<sup>7</sup> This disclosure states that one’s commitments to community include the philosophical community but also spans beyond it. It states that our intellectual development as philosophers has already been informed by and will continue to be informed by the distinct epistemic and ontological ways we inhabit the world. Despite long running contentions with “identity-based politics,” Kimberlé Crenshaw clarifies that “[t]he problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences.”<sup>8</sup> Through marginal disclosure, many of us seek to reveal our sprawling connectedness and we aim to recognize how our connectedness can impact our presence and intellectual development. We strive to highlight a difference in scholarship and a difference in how we might choose to inhabit the traditionally white, male, heterosexist space of academia, and more particularly, philosophy. In other words, our disclosure is a warning that you should not perceive us as any other student but rather as “troublemakers” who can truly push and challenge departments for the better as our purpose is to disrupt the “philosophical status quo.”<sup>9</sup>

*For what academia truly is* means that one recognizes the neoliberal tendencies within the academy, noting how the institution falls prey to marketplace ideologies. Though one might not be sure whether they will be a docile subject or troublemaker in the academy, one must make it into the academy to even face that dilemma.<sup>10</sup> That is why select marginalized students deploy identity-based politics as a strategy. A strategy that acknowledges how “marketplace ideologies,” as described by Patricia Hill Collins, have impacted academia’s desire to meet various “marketplace needs.”<sup>11</sup> In this case, the “marketplace needs” of a historically exclusionary institution like academia, and a discipline like philosophy, is to entice and retain outsiders-within who are socially distant from academia. When these neoliberal institutions seek out these students, they serve their larger systems and agendas by pursuing our unique presence and particular research interest. These institutions can make themselves eligible for select grants and endowments where they would otherwise be ineligible. Departments improve their marketability as diverse, which can attract additional diverse students—while also improving departmental optics at a time where



anti-Black and anti-Trans violence is more visible to the non-marginalized and the marginalized alike.

Even if our own inclination does not bring about this kind of strategic disclosure, this strategy is also regularly encouraged by select undergraduate institutions, the varying minorities in philosophy programs, the plethora of minorities in the humanities programs, or the advice of current marginalized graduate students. This marketplace place ideology is the kind of “we only need so many” institutional thinking that could make people like ka’Nobuhlaluse and I believe we are competitors. The drive for scholars of color to perceive our peers as competitors are fueled by market logics, claiming a finite and quantifiable interest in scholars like us. Again, this is no coincidence but instead reveals that these programs and institutions are also aware that this disclosure of difference can be advantageous somehow. Some graduate programs support this idea of disclosure by saving you the trouble of having to embed this information in your personal statement skillfully by providing you with the option to write an entirely separate “Diversity Statement.” This observation does not intend to insinuate that all programs which offer the option to write a “Diversity Statement” are insincere in openly requesting marginal disclosure. Still, the growing popularity of “Diversity statements” represents an additional level of labor in which you must articulate your difference, which will not be expected of our non-marginalized colleagues. Despite the perceived benefits, this kind of disclosure has selective ramifications.

Take a portion of my disclosure, for example, wherein I say that I am a Haitian American Black woman from Brooklyn, New York. When I wrote this, I expected this to be valuable for some of the reasons I already mentioned, but I could not anticipate them all. Though I did not expect to study Caribbean philosophy, it is no shock that I was open, willing, and excited when introduced to this very subject matter. Due to the incomplete nature of marginal disclosures, I did not explicitly state that I come from a working-class family. Perhaps I thought it was implied. However, even if I were to include this in my description, I do not believe it would have the same ramifications as my Haitian identity. For instance, I could have added that I am a low-income student whose parents came to this country and became factory workers while all five of us lived in a one-bedroom apartment. Furthermore, we were able to move to a bigger apartment and attend relatively better schools only because my mom worked twelve-hour days, weekdays, and weekends, as a home attendant. At the same time, my dad worked similar hours as a paratransit bus driver. However, I sincerely doubt this disclosure would have entailed me being encouraged into theorizing socioeconomic status because of my lived experience. In a similar vein, marginal disclosure, by statement or phenotype, is not always read as valuable for “marketplace needs.” Instead, the perception can be that you will not be “marketable” because you will not be interested in staying within the true philosophical cannon. This assumption fails to realize that the aspects of my marginal disclosure that I came to study were new to me as it would have been for me to, for example, become a Hegelian. When you are already experiencing extreme intellectual self-doubt in a

discipline that has theorized against your belonging there, and are primarily met with engagement and enthusiasm when you enter courses that overlap with your identity, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I became invested in my Haitian-ness or Caribbean-ness and my Black woman-ness, not because it was wholly what I planned to do but what I was, and am supported in, doing.

### III. COMMUNITY

Though I (Lamarre) recognize the contrived ways in which I discovered my research interests, I have absolutely no regrets in the sense that I thoroughly enjoy exploring these new ideas. My concern is around the failure to recognize that these intersecting identities and research interests come with a set of duties and responsibilities to these communities beyond the functions of solitary scholarship. In other words, I should not be encouraged to cultivate research interests that mirror portions of my marginalized identity simply because they are trendy, niche, or register as authentic in an academic setting. Instead, the expectation should be that there is immense value in theorizing from and serving those communities acutely. This realization only began to percolate in my mind after reading Joy James and Ruth Farmer’s edited volume *Spirit, Space, and Survival: African American Women in (White) Academe*.<sup>12</sup> Concerning the individualism academia fosters, James described alienation as the “signature of academia” and makes note that “[i]n belonging to a people seeking freedom from colonization, African American academics face issues of responsibility and accountability, unrecognized by White colleagues.”<sup>13</sup> The inability of privileged colleagues to recognize this responsibility and accountability causes tension when diasporic people take philosophy to be a pragmatic discipline that requires service. At the same time, “traditional” academe devalues or disregards this kind of activity-based theorizing.

Now, this insight provided me with increased clarity on a sentiment that is often expressed by undergraduate and graduate first-generation students. This sentiment is “my family does not understand what I do or the responsibilities I have as a student.” This perception often leads to tensions and disputes surrounding the regular requests family members make of us as first-generation students. In this case, I am not referring to the financial contributions marginalized graduate students make to their families, which creates an additional strain on graduate stipends. Lamarre, I (ka’Nobuhlaluse) actually want to stress the material realities of being a low-income student in that very exception you just named. As an international student, I do not have the luxury to go home as frequently as I would like to. I do not have any financial support from my family (even if I needed help, the value of the South African Rand to the US dollar makes it hard), instead, I am the one who has to send money home. This was my reality when my mother lost her job last year. The responsibility that I have towards my family is not occasional but on going. This responsibly is best known as “black tax” in South Africa. As the first one to even get a university qualification, supporting my family is not a conversation about choice, this is an obligation. Interestingly, when I am in the US, I am a low-income student, but to my family, I am not. These are the complexities that our marginal disclosures do not highlight.



I (Lamarre) appreciate your ability to nuance this discussion with not only the material obligation to family, but also what it means to have this responsibility transnationally, ka’Nobuhlaluse. Despite my family’s recent experience with job loss due to COVID-19 as well, the requests my family continue to make of me, like many of our first-generation and low-income peers, are requests for my presence, service, and time. These duties range from assistance in childcare, eldercare, job searches, family mediation, and educational support for younger family members. What first-generation students oftentimes perceive to be potentially unreasonable or additionally taxing about these requests is that it diminishes our ability to solely dedicate our time to our academic pursuits and our “new lives” as scholars. A social position that seemed nearly impossible to reach and seems more challenging to maintain every day. So, in just a year, academic institutions can cause first-generation and low-income students to render their own immediate families a hindrance to their educational training. This import is far more sinister than a “lack of understanding,” as it allows one to rationalize that providing decreased aid and resources to marginalized families and communities is a worthy sacrifice for the greater academic good. Sure, this orientation may reap prestige for oneself and financial benefits for one’s family after years of isolation. Still, the chances of securing a viable placement in an extremely competitive job market, only to be further stressed by the impacts of COVID-19, are incredibly precarious.

If academia alienates low-income and first-generation students such that family becomes a barrier to success, how are we expected to serve any community? We are not. We are labor and resources estranged from kin and installed into an academic community that devalues any external investments that detract from rigorous scholarship. In order to do service for the communities we expose in our marginal disclosure, we cannot separate community needs from academic responsibilities, regardless of their so-called incompatibility. With the hope that our sisters keep us accountable, we, too, intend to move forward in academia, recognizing that “I am because we are.”

#### IV. THRIVING

Will you survive?

No, darling, I will thrive

– Ijeoma Umebinyuo, *Questions for Ada*

Now Lamarre, here lies another conflict that I (ka’Nobuhlaluse) am feeling about these essentializing conversations (i.e., being low-income or first-generation), these are tensions that have been highlighted by Zine Magubane in *Hear Our Voices: Race, Gender and the Status of Black South African Women in the Academy* (2004); Mabogo Percy More in *Looking Through Philosophy in Black* (2019), and Pumla Dineo Gqola in *Reflecting Rogue Inside the Mind of a Feminist* (2017). On the one hand, I think that it is important for us to share the challenges that we face as Black, first-generation, low-income, etc. students. However, these narratives can be objectifying. They do not capture how I view myself, how you (Lamarre) view yourself, and how other Black feminist scholars within the academy view themselves. To view oneself primarily through the lens of marginality is to succumb to objectification. bell

hooks reminds us that as “objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject.”<sup>14</sup> It is for these reasons that we need to reshape our narratives. I am interested in the narratives that show us thriving in the academy. Whiteness thrives in seeing us suffer, this is why there is so much interest in Black suffering and pain. So, while it is important for marginalized scholars to share their narratives, we need to be careful in how we share these narratives. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) warns us, there is danger in telling a single sided story and we have the social responsibility as Black people not to participate in the creation of one-sided narratives. Most of the time the narratives around being first-generation only focus on the challenges that we must overcome. While all the aforementioned narratives are part of our narratives, we are not single narratives of struggle.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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#### NOTES

1. Guy-Sheftall, *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, 451.
2. Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought.”
3. Lorde, “The Uses of Anger.”
4. Ibid., 280.
5. Ibid., 281.
6. Weir, “Feeling Like a Fraud?”
7. Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” 1242.
8. Ibid.
9. Yancy, *Philosophy in Multiple Voices*, 6.
10. Di Leo, *Corporate Humanities in Higher Education: Moving Beyond the Neoliberal Academy*, 57–69.
11. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 302.
12. James and Farmer, *Spirits, Space, and Survival: African American Women in White Academe*.
13. Ibid., 42.
14. hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 42; via Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 78.

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## Confessions of a Working-Class Student

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This is not a philosophical argument. This is not a theory or analysis. It is an attempt at recollection. My intention is to illustrate my personal experience as a first-generation and low-income philosophy student, but I would not be surprised if these experiences resonate with many other students from similar backgrounds. It is not a unique experience to need to support oneself, even if the financial need is causing significant harm to one's well-being. It is not unique to have to teach yourself how to do and handle everything on your own, because you have started doing things your caretakers didn't. I would like to say that I appreciate being able to share my experiences and thoughts here. The opportunity to be able to write about this should not be treated lightly, only because it is such a special occasion when others want to listen. I hope that this piece can offer something to those who have faced similar struggles and those who have not. More than anything, I hope it can initiate conversation and make a difference.

I am from Calexico, a small border-town where Mexicans make up 97 percent of the population. It is a small cultural bubble almost stuck in time—one that is currently notorious for its position on the border and drug-related crime, its corrupt city government and police, and its intense heat. It is a strong community, and what I mean by that is it possesses a potent culture which bleeds proudly into the identity of all its members. If you leave, you find that there always seems to be something important missing in every place you live thereafter. I used to believe this was just my family and the food, but now I understand that the thing I silently searched for in college, but could not find, was a place of belonging and a sense of community. Maybe I shouldn't even try to compare the level of social and civic engagement I had in my hometown with my experiences as a student in a research institution's philosophy department. After all, community is not simply the collaboration between individuals, but it also requires a sense of mutual recognition between them. I could not expect to just find something like that at school, or in any place which isn't *home*. Sometimes, I find myself romanticizing my high school academic experiences, where I had a strong sense of confidence in the classroom, when I felt genuinely connected both to my teachers and my classmates. I miss feeling like I am coming from the same place as those around me and have something of value to share with them and vice versa. The harsh reality at the University of

California, San Diego (UCSD), more often than not, was that I found myself so intimidated by my professors and peers that I would not engage in class discussion at all.

My family knew nothing about the major I had chosen and did not know what to think, other than that it would help me get into law school, which is what they ultimately wanted. My grandma (or as I call her, my *Palle*) never told her compadres that I studied philosophy. She told them that I was studying "para ser abogada" (to be a lawyer). Nobody in my family had gone to university before me, so it was a moment of success for all of us when I received my acceptance letters. I think this must be a common experience for first-generation students: having complicated feelings about our individual goals and success, perhaps to the point where we begin to misunderstand ourselves. Maybe we find that we have been misunderstanding ourselves all along. I have often felt as if my journey was not solely my own, but that it also belongs to my entire family, all the way back to my Nana Maria (my powerful ninety-eight-year-old great-grandmother). My mother had me when she was sixteen years old and that has always made me feel obligated to make her proud. If my mom or family would not get their degree or the opportunity for a successful career, then I would do it for all of us. I used to dream of getting rich in order to take care of my family and give them everything they wanted. These feelings cause a lot of difficulty when making choices solely for myself. It's true, I would not have been able to make it to university without the sacrifices of my family, especially my parents and my grandmother. They deserve my success as much as I do, and of course I want to make them happy. I also feel the need to set an example for my younger siblings and cousins. I must show them what it takes to be able to leave our small border town in order to get a "good" education and a job. I cannot just abandon this dream of a career and money because it feels heavy with history, with my family's struggle up until this point as well as our whole future. The dream is not just mine to leave behind.

When I arrived at UCSD I was going through the worst time of my life emotionally. My mental health was not in good enough shape for starting my adult student life. Long story short: I was kicked out of my house after an explosive fight with my parents—I would not speak to them again for months. This was a time of many changes, moving, and financial anxiety for which I did not have their support. I cannot explain how devastating that was for me, and it set the tone for my independent life moving forward. I moved for school even though at that time I was living every day knee-deep in anxiety and depression, looking forward to absolutely nothing. In a sick sense though, the traumatic fight between my parents and I helped in the long run because it gave me cause to submit a petition to be considered an independent student for the purposes of financial aid. This meant that my parents would no longer be financially responsible for me, therefore, I would qualify for more aid since their income would no longer be considered a part of mine. Once I found out my petition was approved, the financial aid representative who was working on my case told me that I needed to start using the free therapy on campus, given the rough situation with my parents. I was a little shocked. Therapy was never a

thing I saw myself doing (or needing). Nobody checked on whether I went or not, and because I was settling in at a new job and a new home, I did not go consistently, even though I should have. Looking back though, I don't think I would've had the time.

There was an intense level of anxiety or dread anytime I was in a classroom, especially in the beginning. I was not prepared to feel so intimidated, even though other Callexico kids who made it out talked about experiencing this when they were studying at a big university. I did not feel like I deserved to be there, and with everything else in my life going on at the time, I could hardly deal with not being able to afford it. The possibility of dropping out due to lack of financial stability always hung over my head, and unfortunately this did not empower or motivate me. Student loan debt was also a source of anxiety. I already couldn't even think of an existence which was not paycheck to paycheck; how could I take on over twenty thousand dollars in loans? I would have to work forever or hope to marry someone wealthier. Even the possibility of wealth after law school did not put the economic anxiety and guilt to rest. I felt that I did not deserve to be in university because I could not afford it and I was not as knowledgeable as my peers. I still feel ashamed that I was never as knowledgeable or well-read as they were because I didn't have time in the same way they did—unlike many of them, I had to work. I soon realized that having the time needed to study was a clear mark of privilege, afforded to those who didn't have to work to make a living during college. Ideas and questions for possible papers quickly morphed into nagging reminders of self-doubt and ever-evolving impostor syndrome.

It's important to mention that having enough money to travel home during breaks to see family is a privilege, especially if they live in another country. Not having to worry about having enough for your next meal or for a doctor's appointment and medication is a privilege. Being able to afford all your required and recommended textbooks and your own printer and ink is a privilege. Having a car is a privilege. So is being able to socialize and go to the gym without interfering with the time you're supposed to be using to make money to pay for your rent. I am constantly reminded of the atmosphere of privilege which surrounds academic philosophy. It can at times be sickening, and it needs to change. I can see how it drives people from working class backgrounds away—a career in reading and writing often looks unrealistic to anyone who does not come from a certain level of material wealth. Sometimes all of philosophy seems like an activity of leisure and/or performance, depending on how you're doing it and who you're doing it for.

With the fall in my academic self-confidence came the slow death of my internal motivation and work ethic. I didn't fit in, in terms of my cultural background or my kind of knowledge. My classmates were not like me, in what they did outside of class and what they cared about. It took a few years before I would make any close friends from the same major, and most of them were transfer students who were just as "lost" in philosophy as I. We could share and bond over the experiences of feeling like the odd-one-

out in a classroom. Whether it was because of our cultural background, sexuality, or socioeconomic circumstances, our major simply didn't offer a place for us. This feeling of alienation did not help my self-esteem and it did not motivate me to try and carve a space for myself, but it was nice to have other people to sink with. A few months ago, I discussed these feelings with another UCSD philosophy alumnus. I was not shocked to hear that they too struggled in having to navigate a program that obviously catered to "smart" kids from higher income backgrounds. The way we talked about ourselves relative to the other philosophy majors was concerning—there were the *real* philosophy majors, the ones who took it very seriously and did well, and then there was the rest of us: the *other* philosophy majors who did not speak much in class, the ones who were perhaps more reserved and less articulate when they did speak. What does this distinction reveal? I will never forget this conversation, mostly because it made me deeply sad, but also because I wonder who else has felt this way.

I was not going to let myself live those four years without a drive or purpose, but it was clear to me early on that it would no longer be school. Up until then, my self-confidence had been built on my academic ability and success. After six months at UCSD, I honestly stopped caring about my grades because they stopped reflecting who I thought I was and who I wanted to be. It was rough, struggling to keep up with work and school, knowing I couldn't do my best and wasn't putting my all into it. Instead, feelings of validation started coming from my part-time retail job, which was obviously better because it paid. My academic responsibilities were doomed to pay the price for my financial hardship: I was always going to need to work in order to survive. Financial need was truly the only obstacle between me and the ability to devote myself fully to my studies.

Once, I emailed a philosophy professor to let them know that I would be leaving class a few minutes early in order to get to work on time. (I would still have to walk twenty minutes across campus, wait for the bus, and then walk to work.) They were fine with it, but wanted to know how many hours a week I spent working. I was sort of thrown off by this question, but I responded that on average I worked about twenty-eight hours. Before I responded, I found myself thinking about how many hours I was going to tell them relative to how many hours I spent in class and studying. The next time our class met, my professor expressed how they were displeased with how our education competes for time with work. They also said that they knew some of us were "working up to twenty-eight hours a week" and that it would simply be better for us if we just "didn't have to." Although nobody else knew about our email exchange, I felt deeply embarrassed about my economic circumstances as I listened to these comments hunched over my desk in the back row of the small classroom. I felt shame and resentment. It never bothered me when I saw everyone around me with MacBooks and other typical college student brand-name items, while I had my ancient and heavy HP laptop that I carried around in the same backpack I've had since high school (I love that backpack!). However, it bothers me deeply that I did not come from enough wealth in order to walk away from the tightrope-balancing-act that is being a full-time student with a job.

Not only did I have to sit through my own internal struggle (where I felt a lot of guilt) when dealing with this, but I had to put up with the expectations of others as well.

To be clear, I do not think my professor meant to make me, or any other working student, feel bad. Nevertheless, those comments were unnecessary. How could my professor have been more understanding and accommodating? The thing is, I'm not sure. I can only say that professors should try to be more sensitive to perhaps what could be radically different economic conditions of their students, and if they are to speak about it openly, be prepared to offer the necessary resources and support for those who are struggling.<sup>1</sup> Most of my professors offered me support by giving extensions of a day or two, maybe with a few words of encouragement and acknowledging my circumstances. This was enough *for me*—I wanted to be able to handle it all, get everything turned in on time, even if I came back home from work at 3 AM the night before and got no sleep. However, not every working student will feel, think, or work this way. Students who are first-generation and working-class should feel able to ask for more flexibility and help from professors when we need it, even if we feel bad about asking. How do we get there?

Trying (and constantly failing) to balance work and school was ultimately the most challenging part about college. I quickly realized how I was naturally much more motivated to work than to go to school. Work was a place where I felt like my labor mattered, it paid me, I felt recognized and productive. I did not feel these ways when doing philosophy. I worked all four years of college even when my therapist repeatedly asked me to consider taking on more loans instead of working. He said I was always on "survival mode" which is common for first-generation and working-class students (who would've thought?!). The idea of living without having to work is absurd to me, but I also acknowledge this is most likely a psychological consequence of struggling under capitalism. But really, I preferred the job because I felt like I made a difference there, I belonged there, I succeeded there, and it provided me with more money than I ever had in my life. To be honest, there were times I felt like I thrived, the total opposite of how I felt at school. Even when the hours were terrible and resulted in my being late or absent to class, I never felt like I had the option to quit work. Nobody else was going to financially support me and somehow having a job kept me going. It wasn't until I had to depend on the sympathy and mercy of my professors that I felt *bad* for working. I am too ashamed to admit how many times I turned assignments in late. I was given a lot of extensions. I couldn't keep up with all the weird shades of shame, (in)validation, and anxiety that contaminated my own thoughts about myself and my academic performance. I have my degree now, yet I do not feel like I truly deserve it. I do not feel like I put in the time or mental effort that is necessary for obtaining a whole BA. I know how much I hustled to get all my papers and readings done, so why do I feel like all of the work that I did put in still didn't amount to much, *like I didn't accomplish anything*?

Four years have passed since I started this journey and I am currently counting my losses. I fear how badly people would

think of me if they knew that I felt as if this experience had resulted in more losses than gains for me. Yes, I gained an education at a top institution, I learned more in four years than I may have learned in my whole life before. I have gone to places my family only wishes they could go, as my mother would say. I am privileged, there is no doubt about that, and I feel guilty writing this because I know that many other people deserve to be in the same place as me but cannot be. There was just a lot of loss I did not anticipate by choosing to go to college. I did not give myself the chance to begin my degree in a healthy, functioning place. I missed out on so much time with my family. My younger brother, who I practically raised, grew up into a teenager and I was not there for that. We are not as close as we used to be. To my dismay, time went on without me. I missed out on too many award ceremonies, sports games, family dinners, and laughter. In some ways I felt like I could not recognize my family's ways of life anymore. My great-uncle, my Tio Chuy, moved back to Calexico soon after I left for college. He is a grandfather figure to me, someone I look up to because he was somehow always in a good mood, always trying to lift everybody's spirits. He was an incredibly supportive father to my cousins and always did his best to take care of both my grandma and Nana. My uncle had lived through so much. He grew up working in the fields and had children to support at a young age. But no matter how hard life got, you could count on his humor, smile, and love. Memories of his jokes and laughter bring me deep comfort and I feel intense guilt and regret for not expressing more of my appreciation to him. I looked forward to being able to spend time with him since he was living at home, and I would go back once I graduated. We didn't have that time together. After he moved, it was discovered that there was a tumor in his brain. I didn't get to say goodbye to him or spend time with him while he was recovering between surgeries; and then he was gone. This is a great regret. My Nana Maria would pass away shortly after her son, a few weeks after I first sat down to write this. That's four years I could have had with the two elders of my family before they were gone. I genuinely feel like college was a time where I had to leave my family behind, and I was unaware that I was making that choice by moving away for school. Work commitments kept me from visiting home much, and now that miserable excuse matters as much as that prestigious piece of paper.

The more time goes on, the less I find in common between myself and the people I grew up with. The *only* people I have truly felt close to and identified with. I do not just feel disconnected from my family because of the physical distance. Now there are way fewer things to talk about, and I find that when my family speaks to me it's more about how things used to be. We become sentimental, but our interactions can feel so passive. I don't even feel like the daughter, granddaughter, sister, niece, and cousin I was before I left. Whenever politics come up my palms start to get sweaty because my family and I do not see eye-to-eye on certain things. Some of my family members glorify my struggles of living on my own and supporting myself. This makes me sad sometimes because I feel like as my family, they should want me to live comfortably, instead of romanticizing me working long hours during finals week and facing housing insecurity. When we disagree, my



family either (1) assumes that my opinion is founded on a superiority complex I developed in college, or (2) does not take my opinion seriously because I studied philosophy. Since they do not understand exactly what philosophy is, they assume that it is too difficult to try and understand, or it is too silly. I honestly still do not know how to respond to this since I do not want to be stuck-up about my education to my own family. I wish they could take me and my studies seriously, though I know in their own way, they do. There is nothing much I can do except hope that we will cross this bridge with time, understanding, and patience.

Philosophy has not been all terrible. I am seriously considering graduate school and have attended programs dedicated to diversity in the discipline in order to feel more comfortable with and aware about my own place in the field. Those experiences, as well as my time at the Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf, have given me so much confidence in myself that I think maybe I *can* do this. I have some sense of support from my family, though my mother and grandmother were devastated when I announced I was no longer into the idea of law school and instead I wanted to pursue philosophy. As far as support from my professors goes, every one of them has warned me about the lack of job prospects in academic philosophy, which is a valid reason to try and rid myself of any desire to enter the profession. I applied to a few master's programs around the time I graduated, and I was accepted to them all. It didn't feel like such an accomplishment for many reasons. I still feel deep down that I'm not a philosophy-type-of-person and maybe the programs I got into only accepted me because it doesn't take much to get in. My family also didn't express much excitement and joy like they did when I was applying for undergrad. This may have to do with the pandemic and overall bad vibes right now, but I feel like they would have shown more enthusiasm if I was sending them screenshots of law school acceptance letters instead.

I would have regretted not pursuing philosophy. Despite how hard it's been, I can't imagine doing anything else. I would say that it wasn't until my second year that I truly began doing better in my coursework because I was motivated by developing my own interests. I can remember that fortunate series of events as follows: 1) I took Mexican philosophy and felt like something was familiar in the content, approach, and atmosphere of the class, which I had never felt before. It was the only time during college where I felt like I was in class back in high school, which may not sound like a good thing—but it is. I don't mean that the class was less difficult, or less philosophical, and therefore easier. No, I faced the same struggles while writing and reading for this class, but, because I felt connected to the content, I was more motivated to do my best. I wanted to understand more, I felt the urge to put in the work and engage with the texts at home and with my classmates during lecture. After taking this course, I became a member of the FiloMex (Mexican philosophy) Lab, which was a culturally and philosophically affirming experience. 2) I took Existentialism and developed a strong interest in Kierkegaard, a philosopher whose work has provided me with a framework that helps me understand the way I live, what I do, and how I love. I would end up having a beautiful experience doing a summer research program where we

worked together as a small class daily to “summon his wisdom.” Having that moment and feeling connected to a particular thinker, their philosophy, and the community which exists only to celebrate and understand their work was very important for me. Before then, I honestly did not know what it was like to do “research.” I had not been to a conference or experienced a Q&A session. I didn't know what a community in philosophy could look and feel like until I did that program. 3) I read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the end of my junior year and felt like my mind was burst open. 4) During my senior year, I participated in the regional Ethics Bowl. I officially became a part of the small undergrad philosophy community on campus because I served as Phil Club Vice President. I also completed my first independent studies: one on Kierkegaard and Hegel, and another about racism and responsibility.

Since I've fully integrated into the working class after finishing my BA, I've missed studying philosophy more than I anticipated. I became comfortable with the idea that I'm not cut out for it, the way I am for working in a non-academic setting. I think I led myself to believe that because I *know* I'm good at working. But I think I can be good at philosophy too. More recently, I have been able to put more time into figuring out the answers to my own questions about existence, doing reading groups solely out of my interests. This makes me feel confident that I have what it takes and all I needed was the time. The part I am most grateful for is the support and help from my advisors, and other philosophers too. I am serious about my plans for graduate school, so who knows what happens next?

#### NOTES

1. Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who read my piece and pressed me to say more on this—there is much to think about.

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## *Abolition University: Mobilizing Black Feminist Philosophy to Transform Institutions of Higher Education into “Vehicles of Decarceration” that Affirm the Lives of First-Generation Students*

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In this moment of national reckoning with structural racism and racialized state violence, particularly as they pervade the US criminal legal system—a moment crystallized by the recent siege of the US Capitol by armed white supremacists, carrying Confederate flags, intent on overturning a democratic election—it is imperative that we recognize and reckon with the work of Angela Y. Davis. An engaged Black feminist philosopher, Davis has for more than fifty years been the most prescient and incisive voice on abolition in the country. Contemporary calls to overhaul the dominant American approach to public safety, to decrease distended public investment in institutions of racialized state violence and to reinvest public resources in

marginalized communities, have their theoretical origins in Davis's consistent call for a New Abolitionist Movement—calls which date back to the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I argue that Davis's philosophy of abolition articulates a vision and analytic framework for refashioning institutions of higher education into "vehicles of decarceration" that affirm the lives of historically marginalized, first-generation students.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, I maintain that reconstructing institutions of higher education along these lines is an essential moment in the actualization of the unfinished project of American abolition. I advance this claim in three steps. First, I summarize Davis's philosophy of abolition, focusing on the way that it revamps W. E. B. Du Bois's historically grounded conception of abolition democracy into a regulative ideal for anti-racist democracy consisting of two essential moments—one negative, one constructive.<sup>3</sup> Then I argue that refashioning institutions of higher education to affirm the lives of historically marginalized, first-generation, formerly incarcerated students is an indispensable ingredient of the constructive moment of abolition.

The second half of the article will apply these insights to the California State University Project Rebound Consortium, a network of programs across fourteen public universities designed to support the higher education and successful reintegration of the formerly incarcerated. This program is an exemplar of the mobilization and materialization of abolitionist philosophy at the postsecondary level. The majority (63 percent) of Project Rebound students are first-generation; 61 percent are Black, Latinx, or Native; and 69 percent are Pell Grant recipients. Many of them had their educational journeys as youths violently disrupted by the school-to-prison pipeline. I analyze how Project Rebound, by centering the leadership of formerly incarcerated people, works to deliver formerly incarcerated first-generation students from the prevalent experience of *compounded imposter syndrome*. Project Rebound helps formerly incarcerated first-generation students emancipate themselves from an imposterism compounded by the prison label—a "badge of inferiority," which not only makes them feel that they don't belong in higher education but is legally designed to deny them both the sense and the substance of belonging in mainstream social institutions altogether.

## I. BLACK FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY AND ABOLITION

Davis's philosophy of abolition is driven by the ideal of abolition democracy. Drawing from W. E. B. Du Bois's analysis of the post-Emancipation period in his work *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935), Davis argues that mass and racially disparate incarceration in the US is a sedimentation of slavery.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is a result of America's *failure* to comprehensively abolish slavery. "Du Bois argued that the abolition of slavery was accomplished only in the negative sense," Davis writes.<sup>5</sup> In other words, slavery was rendered illegal and formally disestablished as an economic institution. However, the Thirteenth Amendment (1865) to the US Constitution did not comprehensively abolish slavery; it explicitly recodified slavery "as a punishment for crime."<sup>6</sup> And as a growing body of scholars, activists, and cultural producers (following Davis) have shown, the

US criminal legal system has served as a receptacle for the persistence-through-permutation of racialized violence and social death ever since.

"In order to achieve the *comprehensive* abolition of slavery," Davis argues:

after the institution was rendered illegal and black people were released from their chains, new institutions should have been created to incorporate black people into the social order. . . . Because this did not occur, black people encountered new forms of slavery—from debt peonage and the convict lease system to segregated and second-class education. The prison system continues to carry out this terrible legacy. It has become a receptacle for all of those human beings who bear the inheritance of the failure to create abolition democracy in the aftermath of slavery. And this inheritance is not only born by black prisoners, but by poor Latino, Native American, Asian, and white prisoners [as well].<sup>7</sup>

Creatively adapting Du Bois's historically grounded concept of abolition democracy into a regulative ideal of social justice, Davis articulates a theory of abolition that is composed of two concurrent and inextricably interrelated moments.<sup>8</sup> By "moment" I mean, in the Hegelian sense (*das Moment*), an essential but partial aspect, stage, or part of a whole. One of the moments of abolition is *negative*, while the other is *constructive*. Comprehensive abolition requires the correlational development of both moments.

The negative moment involves "a negative process of tearing down," i.e., dismantling the prison industrial complex and the vestiges of slavery embedded within it. This is the moment of *decarceration* and *divestiture*. When ideologically detached from the second, constructive moment of abolition, the moment of divestiture is distortedly deployed by detractors to foment fear and to caricature abolition as, at best, naively utopian or, at worst, an irresponsibly monstrous agenda of inciting complete, unaccountable disorder. "When abolitionists raise the possibility of living without prisons, a common reaction is fear—fear provoked by the prospect of criminals pouring out of prisons and returning to communities where they may violently assault people and their property."<sup>9</sup> We bear witness to this caricatured, often explicitly racialized fear, for instance, in reactionary calls to *defend* the police against the mass mobilized demands to *defund* the police, and at rejoinders to the claim that "Black Lives Matter" with counter-assertions that "All Lives Matter" or "Blue Lives Matter" (as if it weren't obviously the case that the mattering of Black lives, and the inscription of that mattering into dominant institutions, were a necessary condition for all lives to concretely matter).

Such fear and reaction are partly the product of our tendency to "transfer to crime other fears for which we have no mode of expression."<sup>10</sup> They also stem from the epistemological resilience<sup>11</sup> of carceral logic, which not only works to confine millions of mostly Black, brown, Native, and socioeconomically disadvantaged bodies, but

also confines our collective capacities for thinking, feeling, imagining, and acting beyond prisons and police.<sup>12</sup> To say that the logic of carcerality is “epistemologically resilient,” following Black feminist epistemologist Kristie Dotson, is to say that as an instituted social imaginary, it can absorb extraordinarily large challenges and disturbances without redefining or dislodging its dominant underlying structure.<sup>13</sup> Like people in the nineteenth century who had become so inured to the instituted system and social imaginary of slavery that they could not conceive of society without it, so it is with the institution of the prison and the logic of carcerality today.<sup>14</sup> Instead of envisioning a world without human cages as an incitement to the *presence* of life-affirming, liberatory possibility, people confronted with the radical epistemological ingenuity of prison abolition as a philosophical and concrete anti-violence project instead imagine a mere *absence* of the carceral status quo—a vacuum of law enforcement teeming with unfettered violence.<sup>15</sup> But such ideologically laden fears disregard or dissemble the fact that decarceration and divestiture comprise just one partial aspect of the philosophy of abolition democracy. The constructive moment of abolition entails radically reimagining public safety,<sup>16</sup> which involves rethinking an array of major public institutions, including, and especially, institutions of higher education.

“It is true,” Davis argues, “that abolitionists want to dismantle structures of imprisonment, *but not without a process that calls for building alternative institutions.*”<sup>17</sup> Abolition democracy “is not only, or not even primarily, about abolition as a negative process of tearing down, but it is also about building up, about creating new institutions.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the second and equally essential moment of abolition is *reconstruction*.

Reconstruction is the affirmative, constructive aspect of abolition—a creative process of fashioning and investing in an array of social institutions, such as public employment, health, housing, and education, that are animated not by exploitation, domination, and social death, but instead by life-affirming relationships governed by equitable access to opportunity and infrastructures of care. Dismantling the carceral logics and systems that “disappear people in the false hope of disappearing the underlying social problems [those people] represent,”<sup>19</sup> these alternative institutions would establish vital systems of support that many communities lack, affirmatively disrupting the intergenerational cycles that set people on track to prison (e.g., poverty, housing and food insecurity, unemployment, abuse, addiction, and undereducation). The institutions of abolition democracy would substantively resolve the plethora of social, economic, and political problems that mass, racialized policing and incarceration in actuality exacerbate and extend by “devour[ing] the social wealth needed to address the very problems that have led to spiraling numbers of prisoners.”<sup>20</sup>

## II. THE PHILOSOPHY OF ABOLITION AND THE FIRST-GENERATION UNIVERSITY

Davis’s work conceptually severs state punishment’s “seemingly indissoluble link with crime.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, she articulates the criminal legal system’s implication

in the structural (re)production of gender, racial, and socioeconomic inequality. One of the critical, and decisively feminist, innovations of Davis’s philosophy of abolition is that, through the concept of the *prison industrial complex*, she shifts our attention from the prison, conceived as an isolated institution, to the wider set of symbiotic *relationships* sustained among correctional communities, transnational corporations, media conglomerates, prison guard and police unions, legislative agendas, and judicial procedural systems.<sup>22</sup> By widening and homing our critical attention in on the broad set of relationships that undergird the prison industrial complex—and through which carcerality and its profiteering insinuate themselves into our everyday lives and institutions—Davis articulates the expansive scope of decarceration as an overarching political vision. She also guides the intention of abolitionist world-making toward the formation of life-affirming relationships across an array of social institutions:

[T]he most effective abolitionist strategies will contest [the relationships that uphold the prison industrial complex] and propose alternatives that pull them apart . . . [and] imagine a constellation of alternative institutions. . . . The creation of new institutions that lay claim to the space now occupied by the prison can eventually start to crowd out the prison so that it would inhabit increasingly smaller areas of our social and psychic landscape.<sup>23</sup>

In making this point in different contexts, Davis repeatedly references the abolitionist significance of educational institutions. “Prison abolitionist strategies,” Davis argues, “reflect an understanding of the *connections* between institutions that we usually think about as disparate and disconnected. They reflect an understanding of the extent to which the overuse of imprisonment is a consequence of eroding educational opportunities, which are further diminished by using imprisonment as a false solution for poor public education.”<sup>24</sup> Structural racism plays a significant role in determining who goes to prison and who gets to go to colleges and universities, as racism “is inscribed in the very processes that create trajectories that lead inevitably toward incarceration or higher education.”<sup>25</sup>

Mass and racially disparate policing and incarceration are reciprocally and recursively related to the erosion of public educational opportunities at all levels. The school-to-prison pipeline diverts the pathways of many would-be first-generation college students, especially youths of color. Not surprisingly, most formerly incarcerated college students are also first-generation. Thus, institutions of higher education—and specifically, the way that they function with respect to formerly incarcerated and first-generation students—are essential to the formation of abolition democracy. “Just as anti-slavery abolitionism called for new schools, so anti-prison abolitionism also emphasizes educational institutions.”<sup>26</sup> Colleges and universities are not only vital to actualizing the promise of equitable access to higher education and its associated opportunities. They are also critical to the construction of lines of communication and coalitional formations that link academic communities and imprisoned communities in ways that recapitulate the historical relationship

between enslaved people and abolitionists.<sup>27</sup> Institutions of higher education are also crucial to the development of infrastructures and communities of care that ultimately (and inclusively) increase public safety, security, and prosperity. Indeed, Davis claims that educational institutions are “the most powerful alternative to jails and prisons.”<sup>28</sup> However, to “transform schools into vehicles of decarceration”<sup>29</sup> requires not only that schools be demilitarized,<sup>30</sup> but that the spaces now occupied by schools be shifted, and their agendas expanded, through empowering relationships with historically marginalized communities that construct life-affirming alternatives to the school-to-prison pipeline and the revolving door of mass incarceration.

Davis focuses primarily on K-12 schools as “upstream,” preventative points of intervention for breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and undereducation and building abolitionist alternatives to the school-to-prison pipeline. I will focus on the California State University Project Rebound Consortium as an exemplar of the mobilization and institutionalization of abolitionist philosophy at the postsecondary level. Project Rebound works both “downstream” by constructing a prison-to-college pipeline and “upstream” by creating opportunities for formerly incarcerated staff and students, as ambassadors of higher education, to mentor marginalized youth of color in their local communities as well as in carceral settings, disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and building a pathway to higher education for first-generation students in its place.

### III. PROJECT REBOUND: TRANSFORMING UNIVERSITIES INTO VEHICLES OF DECARCERATION AND CONSTRUCTING INFRASTRUCTURES OF CARE

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world,<sup>31</sup> and California has the second largest prison and jail systems in the country.<sup>32</sup> Mass incarceration drains state budgets, depleting public resources that might otherwise be allocated to strengthen social safety nets and improve educational access and quality; it is also a significant generator of social inequality, contributing to the creation of a class of people permanently locked out of the opportunities of mainstream society, even well after they are released from the system. Formerly incarcerated people face momentous obstacles to successful reentry. The American Bar Association (2015) has cataloged over 45,000 federal and state statutes and regulations that impose collateral consequences on persons convicted of crimes, including barriers related to accessing affordable housing, transportation, and gainful employment. Currently and formerly incarcerated people also face tremendous roadblocks in accessing the transformative power of higher education, which for many is the most effective and successful pathway to a more purposeful and prosperous life. Prisons overwhelmingly prioritize labor over education. Education in prison tends to be restricted to adult basic education, high school equivalency, vocational, or career and technical education, but not college. And only in December 2020 did the government finally end the twenty-six-year ban on Pell Grant eligibility for incarcerated students. While possessing knowledge, experience, and skills that stand to enrich the university community,

formerly incarcerated students (and aspiring students) have uniquely urgent needs in navigating academic institutions, accessing the available academic and student supports (or even knowing what supports there are), and acquiring the soft skills and social capital necessary for academic and postgraduate success.

The California State University (CSU) Project Rebound Consortium is a network of programs across fourteen universities within the largest public four-year university system in the country that are designed to support the higher education and successful reintegration of the formerly incarcerated through the mentorship and living examples of other formerly incarcerated students, graduates, faculty, and staff. Project Rebound offers a community of support to students who have experienced the traumas of incarceration and who now face a multitude of social barriers related to housing, employment, transportation, and food insecurity—barriers that threaten to derail their lives and lead to re-arrest. Operating throughout the state of California, Project Rebound builds the capacity of CSU campuses to support reentering students by eliminating barriers and mitigating insecurities that compromise their ability to thrive academically. Project Rebound constructs a life-affirming alternative to the revolving door policies of mass incarceration by making higher education more accessible to and supportive of formerly incarcerated students and aspiring students so that they can acquire the knowledge and skills of a university education, enhance their capacity for civic engagement and community leadership, secure meaningful and gratifying employment, empower themselves and their families, and ultimately make stronger, safer communities.

Sixty-three percent of the more than four hundred self-identified formerly incarcerated CSU students that are part of the Project Rebound community are first-generation college students; 61 percent are Black, Latinx, or Native. Like (other) first-generation students, formerly incarcerated students often experience “imposter syndrome,” a psychological pattern characterized by pervasive self-doubt, in which an individual harbors a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud.<sup>33</sup> Imposter syndrome is more broadly experienced by many first-generation students, who are often made to feel that they don’t belong in college; that they lack the background and social capital deemed necessary to succeed in higher education.<sup>34</sup> Students suffering from impostor syndrome are more prone to low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, social isolation, and burnout.<sup>35</sup> Due to associated feelings of separation or dissociation from self, such students also frequently select majors and careers that do not align well with their own passion and purpose, which can lead to loss of intrinsic motivation, exacerbated emotional exhaustion, and withdrawal.<sup>36</sup>

Students who have experienced incarceration (again, the majority of whom are also first-generation) experience *compounded* forms of imposter syndrome. They are not only made to feel that they don’t belong in higher education; they are frequently made to feel that they don’t belong in mainstream social institutions at all. This feeling is the product of extensive and purposeful social engineering.



Formerly incarcerated students arrive at the university with what the late sociologist Devah Pager called a “negative credential.”<sup>37</sup> Like educational or professional credentials, the “negative credential” of a criminal record “constitutes a formal and enduring classification of social status, which can be used to regulate access and opportunity across numerous social, economic, and political domains.”<sup>38</sup> Unlike an earned educational or professional credential, however, which grants an individual access to opportunities, the criminal credential is “a unique mechanism of stratification,” an unearned imposition of the state, manufactured out of 45,000 collateral consequences of criminal conviction, that “certifies [formerly incarcerated people] in ways that qualify them for discrimination or social exclusion.”<sup>39</sup> The state-sanctioned social stigma of criminal conviction is so extensive and intractable that scholars and activists refer to it as a “mark,” “brand,” “label,” or “badge of inferiority” (thereby conceptually linking collateral consequences with *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), one of the most notorious decisions involving race in the history of the US Supreme Court, which established the “separate but equal” principle that was used until 1954 to legally uphold Jim Crow segregation).

Formerly incarcerated students have an abiding fear of being exposed and marked by “the prison label.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, as legal scholar Michelle Alexander argues in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, “the system of mass incarceration is based on the prison label, not prison time. . . . Once a person is labeled a felon, he or she is ushered into a parallel universe in which discrimination, stigma, and exclusion are perfectly legal, and privileges of citizenship such as voting and jury service are off-limits.”<sup>41</sup> As a “badge of inferiority,” the prison label “relegates people for their entire lives to second-class status . . . locked out of the mainstream society and economy—permanently.”<sup>42</sup> The prison label compounds the imposter syndrome felt by formerly incarcerated, first-generation students. Produced by punitive institutions and sensationalizing media conglomerates, the outsider or marginalized self-concept that formerly incarcerated students internalize is an integral currency of the “closed circuit of perpetual marginality” that mass incarceration manufactures.<sup>43</sup>

A significant part of the work of Project Rebound is geared toward the elimination of the prison label and the social stigma of incarceration. One of the primary ways Project Rebound erodes the social stigma of incarceration is by centering the leadership, agency, civic engagement, and living example of formerly incarcerated college students, graduates, faculty, and staff. The principle of “each one teach one” is at the core of Project Rebound’s philosophy. Project Rebound staff have an incarceration experience of their own. Many are alumni of the program who have successfully transitioned back to society by pursuing higher education as a transformative practice, earning undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, pursuing research, and assuming leadership roles within their communities.

Believing that those closest to the problem hold the seeds of the solution, Project Rebound program staff and student peer navigators support other formerly incarcerated people with admissions and financial aid applications, course

registration and major selection, soft skills and technical literacy, student life and leadership, securing internships, and career development. Through trauma-informed, asset-based community development and public education, staff exemplify, highlight, and build upon the many character strengths that formerly incarcerated people bring to institutions of higher education—virtues like resilience, persistence, resourcefulness, enthusiasm, gratitude, self-determination, and commitments to fairness and social justice. Project Rebound staff and students also amplify the unique critical insights of currently and formerly incarcerated people. Borne of the lived experience of struggle with the intricate injustices and indignities of the prison industrial complex, the insights of Project Rebound scholars productively complicate and contribute to scholarship, teaching, and policymaking on criminal justice, social inequality, and public safety.

By recasting the experience and survival of incarceration as a source of personal and collective empowerment, Project Rebound provides formerly incarcerated students with an opportunity not only to socially reintegrate in a college setting, but also to psychologically integrate their lived histories into their present identities, projects, and pursuits in an empowering way that dislodges the definitions imposed upon them by the prison label. As one Project Rebound alumnus, Robert, puts it:

Project Rebound is an existential spot for me. It’s where I get together with others who are similarly situated; they have an incarceration, as I do. That’s a huge part of who I am. . . . Project Rebound has been a scaffolding. It’s allowed me to integrate this important part of me into this educational experience and not have to feel like I’m hiding this part of myself.

Project Rebound scholars routinely speak of the freedom felt from “coming out of the shadows,” exercising agency in their own self-definition, and utilizing their knowledge and experiences to teach and empower others. By shattering the stigma and shame associated with the experience of incarceration, Project Rebound creates a culture that acknowledges, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, “that where life is precious, life is precious,” that there is no essential difference between people in prison and people in the free world.<sup>44</sup> Currently and formerly incarcerated people are not failed human beings deserving of second-class citizenship; they are intrinsically valuable people—the overwhelming majority of whom are precious Black, Latinx, and Indigenous lives—whom we recognize as our friends, as members of our families, communities, and in some cases, our selves.

### III.1 CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES OF CARE AND BELONGING

One of the primary goals of Project Rebound is to cultivate a culture of care and belonging for formerly incarcerated students on California State University campuses across the Consortium through community building, holistic peer-led and professionally supported healing practices, and wraparound support that help Rebound Scholars actualize their full potential. This entails that our students not be

seen and not see themselves as clients and recipients of services—not as multiply disadvantaged objects to be managed—but rather as valuable members of a community of care and aspiration.

For example, in response to the fact that formerly incarcerated people are ten times more likely to experience homelessness than the general public,<sup>45</sup> Project Rebound at CSU Fullerton established the first transformative housing community for formerly incarcerated university students in the nation in 2018. The John Irwin House is named after Dr. John Irwin, a criminology professor at San Francisco State University who founded Project Rebound in 1967 and, prior to becoming a scholar, had spent five years in prison himself. The John Irwin House not only provides housing for six students, but also serves as the hub of Project Rebound's community-building work. It provides a space for the entire Project Rebound community to participate in regular social gatherings, orientations, workshops, mentorship meetings, celebrations, peer-to-peer support meetings, and more. The Irwin House is a scholar-centered space, thoughtfully designed to support learning and cultivate life skills so that our students can successfully transition to independent living after graduating from the program.

As a community center, the Irwin House also enhances Project Rebound as a community of social and psychological reintegration. Like other first-generation students, the identity tensions and estrangements that first-generation, formerly incarcerated students experience in their educational journeys are often multilateral and multidirectional. Students experience compounded imposter syndrome when they begin to integrate onto campus and interact with faculty, staff, and their more "traditional" student peers. They also often experience tension and estrangement from their families and communities of origin, who for a variety of reasons often experience cultures of higher education as foreign—sometimes even as unwelcoming, threatening, or hostile. It's noteworthy that this sentiment from one's family is common not only among formerly incarcerated students in Project Rebound, but first-generation students more broadly. Project Rebound works to mitigate this estrangement and resist the institutional history of US higher education, which has predominantly served *exclusionary* ends, reproducing rather than redressing social inequality. Utilizing the student-centered, yet domestic space of the Irwin House, Project Rebound welcomes students and their multigenerational families to commune with staff, faculty, and community partners at monthly cookouts, food pantries, holiday gatherings (e.g., "Friendsgiving"), and graduation celebrations. Students' families, including the youths of the next generation, are not patronized or ostracized, but affirmed and recognized as integral participants in and beneficiaries of Rebound Scholars' educational and emancipatory journeys. In this way, families of Rebound Scholars feel less estranged from the educational pursuits of their loved one, but instead, come to see themselves as part of the intellectual and social community of which their loved one is a part, and students' children, nieces, and nephews frequently come to see themselves as future college students, thus interrupting intergenerational cycles of undereducation, addiction, and incarceration.

Attending to students' basic needs is an integral part of constructing abolitionist infrastructures of care. Over 40 percent of CSU students experience food insecurity and 10 percent experience homelessness.<sup>46</sup> Project Rebound knows from experience that these rates are higher among first-generation, formerly incarcerated students. In addition to providing housing and housing support scholarships, Project Rebound also provides meal vouchers and other forms of support to increase the food security of students. For example, Project Rebound at CSU Fullerton launched a Food Justice Initiative to address the escalating food insecurities of Rebound students and their families during the COVID-19 crisis. Pivoting in response to the rapid closure of campus infrastructure, which suddenly deprived the members of the program of the campus food vendors upon whom they rely upon for regular meals, Project Rebound at CSU Fullerton created a food pantry at the Irwin House and then broadened that work to encompass an organic community garden, horticultural training, and culinary skills curriculum aimed at providing Rebound Scholars with more equitable access to healthy food and empowering them with knowledge and skills to ensure greater long-term food security for them and their families. The garden also contributes to the holistic healing and basic wellness needs of Rebound Scholars by providing a therapeutic outdoor space, conducive to physical distancing, where students can socialize and serve the community while earning a wage and receiving hands-on experience with the harvest cycle—from seed to table. In these ways, Project Rebound helps develop networks of care, including housing and food security, for first-generation and formerly incarcerated students who might otherwise lack these critical sources of security.

Such infrastructures of care produce measurable and discernible results. Project Rebound is resoundingly successful. Compared with the State of California, which has a 46 percent recidivism rate, zero percent of Project Rebound students have returned to prison. Furthermore, 65 percent of Project Rebound students earn over a 3.0 grade point average, and 87 percent of Project Rebound graduates have been admitted to postgraduate programs or secured full-time employment. These results demonstrate that investing in abolitionist infrastructures of care increases public safety while dismantling systems of oppression and exclusion.

### **III.2 SHIFTING THE FOOTPRINT OF THE UNIVERSITY TOWARD JUSTICE**

The communities of care that Project Rebound cultivates extend beyond the university. Project Rebound builds bridges between the university and a broad array of community and grassroots political formations and philanthropic entities—founding mentorship programs with elders in the community, designing capacity-building workshop series on civic engagement, trauma-informed social work, and alternatives to violence that are facilitated by community-based organizations, and engaging in outreach and mentorship with currently incarcerated people and youth directly impacted by the criminal legal system. Forging these new relationships is not only a matter of increasing equitable access to higher education—the

language of “access” implies that the university makes itself more accessible while otherwise remaining unchanged. By embracing and empowering first-generation, formerly incarcerated students on university campuses, and by constructing networks of care and advocacy among them and diverse community partners, Project Rebound shifts the footprint of the university toward social justice.

Project Rebound exemplifies the leading role that institutions of higher education must play in the theory and practice of constructive abolition. Through student-centered, grassroots-oriented empowerment work, first-generation, formerly incarcerated students, faculty, and staff can inspire and reconstruct universities so that they begin to crowd out the prison industrial complex, so that the prison industrial complex inhabits increasingly smaller areas not only of our social and psychic landscape, but of our state and municipal budgets. To be sure, negative abolition is essential. We must divest from prisons and police, which for decades have consumed increasingly breathtaking proportions of state and municipal budgets, cutting public investment in education, health, employment, and housing, while producing greater social inequality and harm. But, as abolitionists have argued for over two decades, divesting from the prison industrial complex must go hand-in-hand with constructive reinvestment in infrastructures of care. Mass and racially disparate incarceration arose due to America’s failure to comprehensively abolish slavery by establishing such infrastructures of care. Just as anti-slavery abolitionism called for new schools, so anti-prison abolitionism must also emphasize colleges and universities as indispensable institutions for forging the future of abolition democracy.

## NOTES

1. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom*, 28–31, 52.
2. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 108.
3. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, Ch. 7.
4. Davis, “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System”; Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom*, 105; Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*; Heiner, “‘From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison’: Angela Y. Davis’s *Abolition Democracy*”; Heiner, “The Procedural Entrapment of Mass Incarceration: Prosecution, Race, and the Unfinished Project of American Abolition.”
5. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*, 95.
6. Davis “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison,” 74–95, 99–100; James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals*, 23; James, *The New Abolitionists*, xxviii–xxix; Heiner, “‘From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison’”; Heiner, “Excavating the Sedimentations of Slavery: The Unfinished Project of American Abolition,” 27–38; DuVernay, *13th: From Slave to Criminal with One Amendment*.
7. Davis, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons, and Torture*, 95, 73–74.
8. Heiner, “‘From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison’”; Heiner, “Excavating the Sedimentations of Slavery,” 40–42.
9. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom*, 29.
10. Ibid., 40.
11. Dotson, “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression.”
12. Heiner and Tyson, “Feminism and the Carceral State: Gender-Responsive Justice, Community Accountability, and the Epistemology of Antiviolence.”
13. Dotson, “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression,” 119.
14. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 22.
15. Gilmore, “Making Abolition Geography in California’s Central Valley”; Kushner, “Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind.”
16. Burroughs et al., “Reimagining Public Safety: A Moderated Conversation.”
17. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom*, 29, 52.
18. Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 73.
19. Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 41; Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 16; Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom*, 50; Davis, “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex.”
20. Davis, “Masked Racism.”
21. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 85; *Abolition Democracy*, 40.
22. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 84–115.
23. Ibid., 107–08.
24. Davis, *Abolition Democracy*, 73.
25. Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom*, 141.
26. Ibid., 53.
27. Ibid., 52–53.
28. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 108.
29. Ibid.
30. Heiner and Mangual, “The Repressive Social Function of Schools in Racialized Communities.”
31. Walmsley, “World Prison Population List (Twelfth Edition).”
32. Maruschak and Minton, *Correctional Populations in the United States, 2017–2018*.
33. Clance, *The Impostor Phenomenon: Overcoming the Fear that Haunts Your Success*; Parkman, “The Impostor Phenomenon in Higher Education: Incidence and Impact.”
34. Canning et al., “Feeling Like an Imposter: The Effect of Perceived Classroom Competition on the Daily Psychological Experiences of First-Generation College Students.”
35. Cokley et al., “Impostor Feelings as a Moderator and Mediator of the Relationship between Perceived Discrimination and Mental Health among Racial/Ethnic Minority College Students.”
36. Chandra et al., “Impostor Syndrome: Could It Be Holding You or Your Mentees Back?”
37. Pager, “The Mark of a Criminal Record”; Pager, *Marked: Race, Crime, and Finding Work in an Era of Mass Incarceration*.
38. Pager, *Marked*, 4.
39. Ibid.
40. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 12–15, 92–94, 137–72.
41. Ibid., 14, 92.
42. Ibid., 92.
43. Wacquant, “The New ‘Peculiar Institution’: On the Prison as Surrogate Ghetto.”
44. Kushner, “Is Prison Necessary?”
45. Couloute, “Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People.”
46. Crutchfield and Maguire, *Study of Student Basic Needs*.

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## Supporting First-Generation Philosophers at Every Level

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The APA has recently taken steps to address concerns related to teaching and supporting philosophers and students from less privileged backgrounds. I want to add to this project by fleshing out some concrete ways that philosophy professors contribute to the challenges faced by first-generation and financially disadvantaged philosophers and students. I hope that in making these behaviors explicit it may be easier for faculty to acknowledge and overcome them.

I will share several undergraduate experiences as a first-generation woman from a low-income background, which demonstrate ways that these identities come into conflict with class differences. I will also include observations and comments from my students. I teach in a university with a significant population of underrepresented students.<sup>1</sup> While I have some things in common with my students in terms of background, they face challenges that I do not, related to race, health, and disability status, for example. I hope that their experiences can add to the conversation in ways that mine cannot.

I will also address something that I only recently recognized. These issues do not go away with the attainment of a degree or a particular job or title, and they can continue to have deleterious effects on one's professional life. The uncomfortable environment that professors create or support is not only damaging to undergraduates, but to graduate students and incoming faculty from less traditional backgrounds, who may feel a renewed sense of imposter syndrome and alienation.

### I. IS PHILOSOPHY WORTH SHARING?

Before I begin, I'd like to quickly set aside the question of whether or not there is value in studying philosophy, in general, as well as specifically for less privileged students.



While this is an essential preliminary question, I assume that most of us working in this field find it to be worth sharing with those who are left out. Nevertheless, many existing arguments establish the worth of philosophy, based on benefits like improved reading comprehension and critical thinking.<sup>2</sup>

We have no reason to assume that the benefits of philosophy fail to apply to less privileged students. There are even preliminary suggestions that the benefits of philosophy are especially significant for underrepresented students.<sup>3</sup>

Philosophy courses can also provide opportunities for students to reflect on meaning, value, and identity. In *Moving Up without Losing your Way* (2019), Jennifer Morton suggests that reflective practices like these can help alleviate concerns relevant to first-generation and low-income students as they navigate spheres of conflicting identity.<sup>4</sup>

Considering these benefits, we ought to correct the current imbalance. I caution those tempted with thinking that philosophy isn't relevant to all students to question their assumptions. We must avoid jumping to harmful conclusions that reify dangerous stereotypes about the link between class and talent, interest, or ability.

Beyond these suggestions, the most substantial reasons I find for increasing access and exposure to philosophy come from teaching. I am not alone in this—philosophers share positive experiences teaching a range of students outside of college, including K-12 students, homeless youth, and people in prisons.<sup>5</sup> Frequently, these students lack prior understanding of and exposure to philosophical works. However, philosophy does not need to have pre-requisites or other kinds of previous exposure, and students from a range of backgrounds are often eager to learn more.

In my case, I first took a philosophy course at community college. I added the class because I liked the professor, but I had a very vague understanding of the content. Despite this lack of previous exposure, I enjoyed the course so much that I asked what I needed to do to become a professor during the first weeks of the term. At that point, I was not on a path to a PhD by any means. I had dropped out of high school during tenth grade, ran away from home, lived among homeless youth and adults, and, eventually, completed a high school diploma program primarily as a way to increase job opportunities beyond minimum wage options. I had not intended to begin the work towards my associate's degree and did so only after the state diploma program provided a scholarship. Philosophy provided a new approach to the specific questions that mattered to me. The ability to call everything into question and disagree with authority and past teachings was empowering. I did not stop until I met the goals I set out in my first course, earning my doctorate, and beginning my career as a professor.

While my initial experience with philosophy may not represent most low-income, first-generation high school dropouts, the immediate and profound interest I developed carried me through despite many challenges.

Some of these challenges reflect deeper issues that may explain why philosophy has continually lacked diversity. These issues come, in part, from the content, e.g., the lack of representation of women and other marginalized philosophers.<sup>6</sup> But efforts to make philosophy more inclusive must also focus on other factors, like an uncomfortable classroom setting or hostile learning environment.

Therefore, we must not only take into consideration the necessity of efforts like diversifying syllabi (which have essential and demonstrable benefits),<sup>7</sup> but must recognize the importance of delivering content without alienating students. In my first philosophy course, my professor was incredibly adept at fostering a sense of community and belonging, which are essential ingredients in the quest to make philosophy more inclusive.

On the other hand, philosophers contribute to the lack of diversity by creating uncomfortable environments, in both overt and subtle ways. This last concern is my main focus, as it hasn't been addressed, and I think that changes in this area would be significant and necessary at every level.

## II. A MISMATCH IN BACKGROUND

I do not think philosophers intend to make philosophy feel exclusionary, but they often act in ways that create this impression, sometimes out of a lack of awareness or understanding. Frequently, the challenges faced by students are invisible—you cannot tell by looking at a student what they are facing outside of the classroom. Given the frequent mismatch between the background of professors and students (especially in institutions with large numbers of first-generation and low-income students), there is the potential for professors to make assumptions that do not accurately reflect others' experiences.

In her recent work, Jennifer Morton works to counteract this lack of understanding by providing vivid first-hand accounts of her students' lives and the emotional, psychological, and ethical costs that they must pay to achieve their goals.<sup>8</sup> This narrative approach can help philosophers develop awareness and sensitivity toward issues that they haven't experienced themselves. For example, if you were a more traditional student, you might make assumptions about what it means to miss a class or fail an assignment. If you lived on campus, your parents provided financial and emotional support, and you did not work outside of school, your assumptions may not reflect students' realities. Many students work full time, sometimes in physically and mentally demanding jobs.<sup>9</sup> Others provide substantial care for children, parents, or siblings. A large number of students are active service members or veterans, which can also create obstacles. They sometimes suffer adverse mental and physical health concerns, which can be exacerbated by financial problems and lack of adequate insurance. Students from underrepresented groups may be confronting micro- and macro-aggressions or actively combating racism, sexism, homophobia, and/or other forms of oppression and exclusion. Many experience overlapping issues that make college work more challenging to navigate. The lack of awareness of who our underprivileged students are can lead to assumptions, stereotypes, and harmful behaviors. Further, when colleagues do not fit the

assumed mold of the “typical professor,” they are likely to fall victim to similar challenges based on assumptions about their backgrounds and experiences, as well. I will now give examples that illustrate these concerns and identify harmful preconceptions.

### **II.1 THE MYTH THAT UNDERPRIVILEGED STUDENTS ARE DOOMED TO FAIL**

It is unfair to assume that your students are set to fail, for example, even if they did not have the same educational opportunities you expect. In my case, I quickly learned that some college professors viewed my academic background as a mark against me. I began community college with a deep sense that I did not belong. It was a community college, after all, and college had seemed like an unattainable dream for most of my life. By the time I graduated from community college, however, I had made significant strides towards feeling like I belonged.

But my confidence significantly diminished on day one as a philosophy major when I shared with my Ancient Philosophy professor that I was a transfer student. He immediately discounted my prior experience with philosophy and suggested that I find a tutor. Even though I earned an A in his course without outside help, I quickly decided that I was *still* an imposter and that my past work could not counteract my lack of initial pedigree. Comments like these can have a lasting impact. Often, it seems that these troubling interactions stem from inexperience with what life is like beyond the academic bubble.

### **II.2 THE IN-CROWD**

Sometimes exclusionary behaviors are puzzlingly overt. In my junior year of college, a young beginning professor with a new Ivy League PhD and flashy sports car learned from another student that I lived in a mobile home park. He asked me what it was like—what kind of people lived there, and if he could observe sometime. His attitude made me feel more like an anthropological specimen than a college student.

Other times, minor slights can compound and contribute to an overall chilly environment. I teach at a university located in a community where many families work in agriculture, and many students come from rural backgrounds. As a professor, if you literally turn your nose up at the smell of cattle and have to leave for the day, you are showing students, staff, and faculty that their home—and perhaps the livelihood that supports their family—disgusts you. This attitude comes through when professors make offhand remarks that “their children would not attend *this* university” or that they could not imagine living in the city or area where most of their students grew up. If students already feel that they do not belong, these subtle behaviors can push them out the door or express that professors view them as *less than*. Even when these comments are not directly shared, these attitudes are likely to come across in interactions with students. These biases are part of why, as I suggest below, it is essential to take students’ comments seriously. If students feel belittled, they may be detecting biases that professors themselves are not fully aware of, and their words may reflect more

profound issues.<sup>10</sup> Here again, these problems move into the profession. When colleagues make assumptions about your upbringing or criticize your educational background, this creates a hierarchy within departments, reflecting the challenges faced by undergraduates. For example, quizzing job candidates about their knowledge of wine or international travel demonstrates that you have a particular type of person in mind for the job. Comments like these can further the feeling of alienation for faculty who come from less privileged backgrounds.

## **III. CREATING COMMUNITY**

### **III.1 DEMONSTRATING RESPECT FOR OTHERS AND ENCOURAGING A GROWTH MINDSET**

While the above examples illustrate various problems, there are positive means to counteract these issues. Becoming aware of our differences and identifying the assumptions guiding our teaching practices can allow us to change. For example, when teaching, we might initially model the confrontational classroom dynamics that we experienced as students. But, we can also adopt methods that work better to promote a sense of belonging.

We have many opportunities to demonstrate respect and cultivate a sense of community. For example, teaching introductory courses includes many opportunities for professors to reveal inconsistencies or contradictions within students’ views. However, we must be careful not to discourage or disregard students as uninitiated beginners. Professors can show respect for students’ burgeoning understanding, even as we aim to help them improve and overcome error. Misunderstandings provide excellent opportunities to illustrate the philosophical virtue of humility, to work through the benefits of scrutiny and critical analysis, and to demonstrate a growth mindset. Encouraging a “growth mindset” (or the belief that intelligence is a quality that can be changed and developed) versus a “fixed mindset” (or the belief that intelligence is innate or fixed at birth) has many benefits.<sup>11</sup> For example, it has been shown to promote a love of learning, encourage students to embrace challenges, and to increase happiness and confidence.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the practice of demonstrating our own shortcomings and potential for progress is an important teaching practice, both as a way to connect and to increase a sense of belonging in the classroom. To this end, I frequently share my past mistakes and progress with students, and encourage them to practice “failing.” Philosophy can just be objectively confusing, even when one has substantial experience in the field. Normalizing these struggles at every level (perhaps, especially in the high-pressure environment of grad school) is one important way to create an inclusive environment. However, when professors show hostility towards their students’ views, this reflects a pernicious elitism that shuts down learning and decreases trust in the professor.<sup>13</sup>

### **III.2 CULTIVATING A SENSE OF BELONGING**

In some cases, students can experience alienation to the degree that it impedes their ability to complete essential

tasks. I recently taught in a summer program focused on bridging the gap between high school and college. The students had received athletic scholarships to play football, and many were members of marginalized groups. Unfortunately, some of these students had a deep sense that they didn't belong. One timid but talented student found college so uncomfortable that a ten-minute meeting with a professor was one of the biggest obstacles of the semester. For context, I am a woman, fairly early in my career, and my students typically fail to find me intimidating, for several reasons, many related to gender and personality. I prioritize ways to encourage students to feel a sense of belonging in college. I've attended and taught workshops on this matter and work with various campus groups towards these goals.

Nonetheless, it took gentle but concerted efforts to increase this student's confidence and sense of belonging. I reached out by email. I pointed out the benefits of his specific contributions. I made it a point to highlight areas where he had made progress and where his unique life experiences proved relevant and meaningful to the class.<sup>14</sup> I focused on increasing both a growth mindset and collaborative learning and created many opportunities for less stressful interactions early on.<sup>15</sup>

I am discouraged when I imagine what would have occurred in many other professors' courses. His lack of eye contact, for example, may have been misconstrued. His sudden absence from the virtual classroom, when put on the spot, could be seen as disrespectful, rather than as a sign of a student trying very hard to overcome his nerves while saving face before his peers. For students in this position, professors must work to create a welcoming environment. The smallest nudge towards the door is often all it takes to convince students to return to their lives before college. Note that in the case of underrepresented faculty, mentoring is essential for overcoming similar gaps. It was not until I got to know professors outside of my department that I felt comfortable sharing the ways that I didn't fit. Their guidance helped me to find my voice and convinced me to continue despite challenges.

### III.3 TAKING STUDENT COMMENTS SERIOUSLY

The behaviors identified above are dangerous for both faculty and students. They can confirm students' beliefs that they just aren't cut out for college.<sup>16</sup> We know that first-generation students finish college in more time and less frequently, and these uncomfortable encounters may provide part of the explanation.<sup>17</sup>

Worse yet, we know that these students may be less likely to complain or self-advocate and more likely to treat professors with undue authority.<sup>18</sup> I have witnessed demeaning and harsh behavior towards students who take it to confirm their perceived shortcomings and do not complain or report poor treatment. These considerations put the onus on professors to ensure that we are advocating for these students. We must correct those who—even inadvertently—contribute to these issues. When we receive complaints or comments, it is prudent to imagine that many more students share these concerns. Of course, student complaints are not always accurate<sup>19</sup>—but, given the sense that philosophy is exclusionary, we ought to work hard to

determine the causes of this view. We cannot disregard the opinions of the most vulnerable, even if it requires checking our egos or seriously editing our pedagogical practices to serve the needs of a changing student population.

We must be aware of the potential for implicit bias and acknowledge that the invisibility of various struggles and identities may enable negative behaviors to slip beneath the radar. It is essential to create awareness of elitism and other class-related attitudes and to assess the climate within existing departments. The attitude that only some people belong is pervasive and often comes to college with underrepresented students. We owe it to them to prevent the proliferation of these harmful attitudes.

## IV. ADDRESSING THESE CONCERNS FOR JUNIOR FACULTY

Given the nearly immeasurable difference between my life pre- and post-college, I have always found it essential to support students from similar backgrounds and to address the challenges that stand in their way. However, it has recently become clear that part of my exclusive focus on students obscured the fact that the exclusionary behavior I have described extends beyond professor-student interactions.

We can tie this to some of the myths embedded in the traditional narrative of upward mobility. Jennifer Morton rejects this narrative due to the overlooked costs and inequities that first-generation and low-income individuals face as they work to achieve their goals. A further problem with the typical portrayal of upward mobility is the idea that once one has "made it" past the hurdles of college, for example, they become accepted as part of the new group, and their struggles disappear.

Contra this idea, we have evidence that first-generation students fare worse than their peers beyond college in salary, interviews, and job prospects.<sup>20</sup> These challenges can stem from a lack of awareness of how the professional world operates and ignorance of one's lack of understanding, or "meta-ignorance." We also know that issues like imposter syndrome present themselves well into professional life.

In my first years as a professor, I failed to acknowledge the continuing influence of these factors. It is now clear that I was trying to navigate within a new sphere without adequate support. I was eager to please and skeptical of my worth, which made it easy to fall victim to behavior that undermined my efforts, added to my workload unfairly, or displayed a lack of respect towards my contributions.

I encourage other professors from less privileged backgrounds to self-advocate and work to understand the possibility of meta-ignorance about policies like parental leave, salary negotiation, and service requirements, all of which caused conflict in my first years.

Although I initially struggled to self-advocate, this was not the endpoint. I've benefited from reflective practices like those suggested by Morton, as well as by finding understanding and community with other philosophers. I've

found ways to support my students while also supporting departmental changes that have made it better for all of us. Most importantly, I found mentors who I could trust to encourage and support my progress. The situation is not hopeless, but, like the alienation of students, it requires awareness as the first step towards change.

It is important to realize that my suggestions will require active work. This includes building departments that engender discussion and constructive feedback, time and patience in identifying and addressing issues, and a willingness to consider alternatives to current practices. This work must be prioritized by departments, especially when junior faculty are working to improve existing environments. In some cases, this will require cross-campus collaboration (e.g., linking in with student support specialists, administrators, and advocacy groups) to ensure that changes will have lasting effects. Acknowledging the need for change is an essential first step, but it will take substantial effort to make a shift in existing departments with long-standing traditions and practices. Given the APA's mission, I suggest creating networks and mentoring opportunities within the organization to help meet these goals.

Additionally, it is crucial to ensure that this work is not the sole responsibility of faculty from less privileged groups, especially as they may be facing other challenges, such as meta-ignorance, or imposter syndrome, as discussed above.<sup>21</sup> We must work together to assess and eliminate bullying, elitism, and hostility in our departments.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, this must begin in Philosophy 101 and continue past dissertation writing, into the job search, and through the tenure process.

I hope that my comments can add to the APA's efforts to improve the field for less-likely would-be philosophers, and I strongly encourage them to continue to prioritize these goals.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank my mentors, past and present, especially Carol Cleland, Michael Tooley, Maya Eddon, Fred Feldman, Evan Oakley, and Jack Temkin. Without their support, I'd have sought other, less fulfilling, lines of work. I am also grateful to Jeff Brown for extensive feedback, and for support from the University of Northern Colorado FRPB Research Dissemination and Faculty Development Grant program, which enabled me to work on this project while gathering data on the experience of First-Generation Philosophy Students. Thank you to the APA and editors of this edition for shifting focus to this important issue.

#### NOTES

1. For example, roughly 46 percent of incoming students are first-generation in 2020, and about a third are Pell-grant eligible.
2. For a survey or reasons to major in philosophy, see the final chapter in Stich and Donaldson, *Philosophy: Asking Questions, Seeking Answers*. There is extensive support for philosophy within the K-12 philosophy movement, and much empirical research to demonstrate benefits (for example, Trickey and Topping, "Collaborative Philosophical Enquiry for School Children"; Millet and Tapper, "Benefits of Collaborative Philosophical Inquiry in Schools"; Mohr Lone and Burroughs, *Philosophy in Education: Questioning & Dialogue in Schools*). There is also data on GRE, GMAT and LSAT scores. However, we must consider whether there is a causal connection between the likelihood to pursue philosophy and better scores, or whether philosophy leads to higher scores (see the data available at [ets.org](https://ets.org), [lsac.org](https://lsac.org), and

[mba.org](https://mba.org). Relevant data is also compiled here: <http://dailynous.com/value-of-philosophy/charts-and-graphs/>).

3. Preliminary results from in-depth studies in the UK suggest that students who are most disadvantaged gain more in reading comprehension and math after philosophy courses, as compared to their peers. See the studies linked here: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/philosophy-for-children/>. I have argued elsewhere that Summer Philosophy programs could improve the achievement gap, primarily due to empirical findings highlighting the benefits of studying philosophy (Peterson, "Can Summer Philosophy Programs Help Close the Achievement Gap?"). The benefits discussed here may be even more relevant and applicable to these students, as they navigate challenges in their own lives and within their communities. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.
4. Morton links these benefits to psychological research on values affirmation. See, for example, Cohen and Sherman, "The Psychology of Change: Self-Affirmation and Social Psychological Intervention," cited in Morton, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*, 130.
5. For example, consider the success of programs like the Princeton Prison Teaching Initiative (<https://prisonsteaching.org/>) or examples of teaching youth in different contexts at the Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization ([plato-teaching.org](https://plato-teaching.org)). I describe my experience teaching a free course for disadvantaged students in my school district in (Peterson, "Can Summer Philosophy Programs Help Close the Achievement Gap?"). Debalina Chatterjee and Joseph Milillo's 2019 PLATO Conference presentation on teaching critical thinking and philosophy to homeless youth at The Caring Place is another relevant example.
6. The APA has many useful resources related to these issues. See, for example: [https://www.apaonline.org/page/diversity\\_resources](https://www.apaonline.org/page/diversity_resources). This page contains many resources and suggestions to increase diversity in philosophy, including efforts to increase philosophy classes offered at every level.
7. See, for example, Saul, "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat and Women in Philosophy," on the importance of adding women to course syllabi. My point here is that while necessary, these efforts may not be sufficient to make the field welcoming to all, especially if departments and classrooms are uncomfortable. We must address both sets of issues.
8. Morton, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way*. For example, students may have to sacrifice the relationships most important to them, confront cultural differences, and contend with the challenges of code-switching.
9. Many students work to pay for college themselves and avoid loans at all costs. Sometimes, this is linked to concerns about their (or their parents') citizenship status, and concerns about the role of federal aid. There is a vast need for mentoring and assistance about financial matters, particularly for students who do not receive this information from their families or peers.
10. Morton's suggestions apply here, as well. Engaging in self-reflective work with students can increase awareness, understanding and empathy of these differences. These benefits extend to student-to-student interactions. One term, after a formerly homeless student in my ethics class shared her experience, I received many informed and conscientious essays on a topic that is sometimes treated poorly by students who hold stereotypes about homelessness. See further comments in section III.2.
11. See Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*.
12. Ibid. See also Leslie et al., "Expectations of Brilliance Underlie Gender Distributions across Academic Disciplines," for example. These benefits may be especially important when students find philosophy initially inaccessible.
13. This is linked to yet another of the "Ethical Costs" Morton discusses. Students' beliefs, values and experiences should not be dismissed, even if they are beyond the range of what the professor may be able to imagine.
14. Several students in this course shared personal experiences with issues facing their families, including struggles related to poverty, the rights of felons', and the effects of racism and white



privilege. I sometimes share an experience of bystanders failing to notice the body of a homeless man in downtown L.A., during the busy morning commute. While students can sometimes be dismissive of issues that they haven't experienced, hearing firsthand from peers, e.g., from an African American student who witnessed police brutality in his community, is hard to turn away from. Of course, a comfortable environment is essential before this can take place, which is why some of the other issues are so important. Normalizing the experiences of those outside of the typical range of philosopher, student or professor is a powerful way to demonstrate belonging, while improving access to the material. Thank you to the reviewers for suggesting further discussion of these points.

15. I do not mean to suggest that we should coddle students, or omit necessary tasks, like conferencing with professors. Instead, I wish to highlight that we can follow methods for encouraging and supporting all of our students, including growth mindset and student-centered learning, without sacrificing rigor. See for example, Friedlaender, et al., "Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap"; Kuh et al., *Piecing Together the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions, and Recommendations*, and Jacquart et al., "Diversity Is Not Enough: The Importance of Inclusive Pedagogy."
16. See for example, Cataldi et al., "First-Generation Students: College Access, Persistence, and Postbachelor's Outcomes"; Cokely et al., "Impostor Feelings as a Moderator and Mediator of the Relationship between Perceived Discrimination and Mental Health among Racial/Ethnic Minority College Students"; Hutchison, "Influence of First Generation Status on Students' Perceptions of Faculty"; Morton, *Moving Up Without Losing Your Way: The Ethical Costs of Upward Mobility*.
17. See, for example, Eismann, "First Generation Students and Job Success"; Cataldi et al., "First-Generation Students."
18. See Cataldi et al., "First-Generation Students"; Hutchison, "Influence of First Generation Status on Students' Perceptions of Faculty"; Swanson et al., "An Evaluation of the Educational Impact of College Campus Visits: A Randomized Experiment."
19. This is especially true for women and people of color, who, research shows, may be unfairly rated due to implicit bias, racism and sexism. (See, for example, Huston, "Race and Gender Bias in Higher Education: Could Faculty Course Evaluations Impede Further Progress Toward Parity?").
20. See, for example, Eismann, "First Generation Students and Job Success."
21. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.
22. Power dynamics can exacerbate these issues, especially for junior faculty, and in smaller departments. When one's chair, for example, creates a hostile environment, junior faculty may put themselves at significant risk by complaining. Gender also plays a role, and women are frequently asked to complete gendered tasks. Therefore, tenured faculty need to become advocates whenever possible.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Women's Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice*

Margaret McLaren (Oxford University Press, 2019). 290 pp. \$104. ISBN: 978-0190947705.

Reviewed by Nancy J. Hirschmann  
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The heart of Margaret McLaren's excellent new book, *Women's Activism, Feminism, and Social Justice*, entails looking at systemic and structural injustice as it is lived and experienced by women. A central theme of the book is that "addressing poverty, oppressive social norms, and violence in interpersonal relationships requires a broad-based approach to social change" (4), and McLaren's book brings together many often-disconnected threads of philosophy: abstract and pragmatic, analytic and political,

systemic and small scale, global and local. This produces three central contributions of the book: a new approach to global issues she calls a *feminist social justice approach*; within that, a philosophy of *relational cosmopolitanism*; and an argument about the importance of women's activist organizations to the achievement of feminist social justice, focusing on two local feminist organizations in order to illustrate her arguments.

After setting out the framework of her argument, McLaren recounts her work with two feminist activist organizations in India, MarketPlace India and the Self-Employed Women's Association in India (SEWA). She considers their practical work as a ground for feminist philosophy; perhaps even a kind of feminist philosophy in itself, but certainly as a touchstone for the political and practical importance of the philosophical points and arguments that she herself makes.

In Chapters 2 through 4, McLaren then considers why alternative approaches, particularly the human rights model, the economic empowerment model, and mainstream cosmopolitan models, are inadequate for the achievement of social justice, particularly for women. Though human rights approaches have produced many positive effects, she argues, they also are problematic in their fundamental assumptions (70), particularly their individualistic focus rather than on "structures and systems" (67), leading to reformism rather than wholesale systemic change. The "one size fits all" rubric" (58) and a focus on "legal and political" rights undermine attention to "economic and social rights," which McLaren believes are particularly important to women as "the largest majority of impoverished people," as well as social rights, particularly education, health, and childcare, all of which are generally left aside (58). Although some of these weaknesses can be addressed by expanding the scope of rights, a deeper critique "that the rights framework is imperialist [is] not so easily accommodated within the liberal rights framework" (59). A focus on rights also seems to be accompanied by implicit, and sometimes explicit, arguments that human rights violations against women, such as domestic violence, are the result of cultural practices, reinscribing the colonialist move (62).

While "empowerment" strategies focus on the economic issues that a human rights focus generally ignores, it too ignores other factors of structural equality that are particularly important to women themselves, such as their children's education (119). Such models are also even more individualistic, operating within a neoliberal framework of individual responsibility and achievement while hypocritically deploying cultural norms against women, such as the "economy of shame" that microfinance institutions often rely on, whether by making communities financially responsible if an individual fails to repay a loan, or, as in Bangladesh, incarcerating women for loan default, which "results in a loss of virtue, according to cultural norms" (126). Such measures actually disempower women in ways that do not get measured.

Cosmopolitanism as it is generally envisioned similarly fails women. Often asserted as a counter to nationalism, its view that we are citizens of the world and that we have a moral obligation to care for strangers, viz. people

of other nations, depends on a western view of abstract humanism and universal capabilities and similarities. It does this by asserting universal principles of justice and equity that are to be applied to everyone around the globe regardless of the specific situation of the country in which they live and the values of their national heritage. So, difference is tangential, and what is more important is that everyone is fundamentally the same, with the same rights and entitlements. For McLaren, such accounts of cosmopolitanism fail because their "commitment to hyperindividualism, abstraction, idealization, and acontextuality overemphasizes certain features of humans and limits itself to addressing moral obligations outside of actual circumstances of inequality and power differences" (150). They also smuggle in imperialist ideas in imposing western liberalism and ideals onto other contexts.

McLaren presents as an alternative to these approaches a powerful argument for gender inequality that she calls a "feminist social justice approach" (5). This approach not only follows the common feminist norm of recognizing the link between theory and practice, grounding her normative arguments in not only ethical ideals but in the lived experiences of women. It also seeks to link a structural understanding of injustice to local instances of its practice. Her argument thereby seeks to link the normative to the economic to the political to the social; and it is not only transnational but also intersectional because gender always intersects with all other aspects of identity, such as race and ethnicity, nationality, economics, religion, cultural practices, motherhood, and other familial relations. But the intersectionality that McLaren takes up is not just in terms of the identities of women; rather, she considers the ways that structures of privilege and oppression work in intersectional ways. That is, although McLaren draws on the experiences of particular individuals who sit at different particular vectors of identity, she is interested in what Maria Lugones called "structural axes of oppression" in which these women live and act rather than their intersectional identities per se. In McLaren's argument, intersectionality happens at the level of structure: systems are intersectional.

A key dimension of the feminist social justice approach is relational cosmopolitanism, which starts from an assumption of common vulnerability and particularly a capacity to suffer. At the same time, it seeks to recognize and embrace difference, indeed treating it, as McLaren puts it, "as resources for mutual learning" (141). Her conception borrows from the thinking of Rabindranath Tagore, reading him through the lens of, and combining his ideas with, contemporary work in feminist philosophy and social theory. Taking as its starting point a long-established feminist norm of interdependence and relationality, popular in feminist thinking since at least Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking work in the early 1980s which McLaren draws on (143), McLaren argues for a normative understanding of relationship building that is founded on principles of feminist solidarity: for McLaren, interdependence doesn't just describe what we are, it should be our basic normative value. McLaren holds that working together across differences is central to the development of our compassion for suffering and can help "expand moral imagination" (144). Relational cosmopolitanism affords an important advance on the

nationalism-cosmopolitanism debate, because it can help resist the close-mindedness and hostility to others, who are seen as competitors for resources, if not antagonists, that can characterize nationalist approaches; while at the same time providing greater nuance and complexity to the sometimes ham-fisted ideals of cosmopolitanism which often ends up simply imposing an obtuse form of western liberalism (thereby smuggling in a kind of nationalism).

McLaren then turns to what a relational cosmopolitan approach can do to foster a feminist approach to social justice, and this turns on two key elements, one philosophical, one practical, but both ethical: responsibility and fair trade. She draws on a notion of responsibility as being responsive to others' needs, rather than the "rights" model of responsibility as taking credit or blame for something—a view that she borrows from Iris Young but in fact goes directly to Gilligan's own view originally introduced in *In a Different Voice*. But we understand her attribution of this model to Young when she seeks to identify a weakness of Young's distinction between social responsibility and political responsibility, a distinction that Gilligan herself does not make. McLaren notes that these two "kinds" of responsibility are intimately related, applying the keen feminist insight that the social is political, the personal is political, the familial is political, the community is political. She attributes to Young the insights that political responsibility starts from the idea that we are connected through our social and economic arrangements; and that political responsibility is a matter of gradation—some are more clearly and directly responsible than others. She deploys these ideas to engage with questions of how to alter structural injustice.

This leads to McLaren's argument in favor of fair trade, which entails the decision of consumers to purchase products that operate within a recognized Fair Trade framework. At first, this might seem like an anemic ending to McLaren's ambitious call for structural change, for many tend to think of it as an individualist consumerist action well within the frame of global capital. Many even dismiss Fair Trade as a neoliberal dodge that cannot produce any fundamental or systemic changes. But McLaren disagrees, arguing that even as we advocate for structural change, individuals must make moral choices in their day to day lives. She points out that individual acts support (or fail to support) larger structures. To reject Fair Trade "obscures the connection between collective political actions aimed at changing unjust structures and intentional, politically informed ethical choices" (226). And it is positive action, not negative. For instance, boycotts of products made through exploitive labor are often seen as effective, as corporations are more likely to respond to consumers "voting with their feet." McLaren points out, however, the problematic aspect of boycotts, in that exploited workers are in many cases worse off if they have no income than if they work under exploitive conditions. She draws on protests against Nike's use of sweatshop as a better model of organized action against the structure, because through massive popular protests the *threat* of a boycott motivated Nike to change labor practices so that the exploitive conditions ended and workers kept their jobs under better conditions. But even well-organized boycotts are not enough; we also

need to advocate for an alternative structure of work, labor and production. We must act materially, not just through protest.

Fair Trade provides such alternative structures, and purchasing such products not only helps individual workers but the alternative economic structure in which they work as well. Thus, McLaren also advocates support of cooperatives, in which members share collectively in the profits, and receive social dividends in that a portion of profits go to collective goods like improving roads. We need to support alternative structures to top down capitalist corporations, and Fair Trade can be a way that westerners, who still need to feed and clothe themselves, can help promote these alternative structures. If protests and boycott threats lead Nike to stop sweat shop practices, that's good; but just continuing to buy from Nike instead of switching to Fair Trade organizations where possible doesn't help change the structure. We have to pursue both the individual and structural, because individuals have to work toward something, not just against. McLaren notes that "feminists who support these organizations through buying their products, political advocacy, and their own efforts to change unjust laws, policies, and social norms . . . engage in a type of multilevel, multifaceted political solidarity that recognizes that women's struggles differ in different social and national contexts, while they are also linked through transnational structural injustice" (194-95). So, it's not enough to buy fair trade coffee, we also have to urge our stores to supply more Fair Trade products, and we have to lobby our government for policies and laws that support fair economic trade. "As consumers, we are implicated in systems of unjust production, and both our individual choices and collective political actions matter" (203).

It is difficult not to be somewhat cynical about this last argument; most of the people who buy \$3 T-shirts at Walmart do so not just because they happen to like cheap merchandise but because it is the only way to make their budgets work. Fair Trade consumerism is decidedly an upper-middle class undertaking. But that is not a reason for such people not to practice it. For those with more resources have greater responsibility for social action. We need not only to recognize how structures must be changed to produce more socially just outcomes; we also need to recognize who is most capable of changing injustice and put the pressure on those entities (such as multinational corporations) to effect these changes (194). Thus, those with economic privilege, including feminist philosophers, have more responsibility to engage in fair trade practices and promote structural change in other ways. Transnational feminist solidarity is an ethical commitment; feminists of the global North have an ethical obligation to support Fair Trade practices and workers' cooperatives.

This broad overview does not do the argument justice, and I have run out of room in this review to discuss McLaren's support of cooperatives over micro-financing, the examples that she provides through her work with MarketPlace India and SEWA, both of which are cooperative organizations, and many finer, more specific aspects of McLaren's nuanced, passionate, and persuasive argument. I found this book

well-structured, -written, and -argued. McLaren's critiques of the shortcomings of existing models are very effective, and her conception of relational cosmopolitanism is very provocative, an important concept that is greatly needed in the debates over globalization, worthy of future research and debate. I used this book in a mixed under/graduate seminar in feminist theory last spring and they found the argument provocative and engaging, and the book enjoyable to read. Highly recommended.

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## *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Post-Secular Times*

Éléonore Lépinard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). 336 pp. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0190077167.

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*Who is feminism for?* The question reverberates frightfully in feminist discourse. Despite decades of theorizing that the unified feminist subject is an impossibility (given differences in race, class, sexuality, etc.), the question remains all too relevant in praxis—much to the detriment of the movement as a whole. Or at least, so argues Éléonore Lépinard in her new book, *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Post-Secular Times*.

The tendency of feminists to rely on such a question, according to Lépinard, is a dangerous one: it results in an ethical stance in which we are liable to judge people as being “good or bad feminist subjects” (11). It is those judgments—particularly on the part of white feminists—which have supported the rise of “femonationalism”—a phenomenon referring to the way that governments have justified anti-immigration and Islamophobic policies in the name of women’s equality.

Instead of asking the “subject” question (*who is feminism for?*), Lépinard posits that we ought to be asking a “relational” question (*with whom am I in community?*). Drawing on Joan Tronto’s ethic of care, Lépinard defines feminism as “a project to care for those who could be part of this political community, who are put in relation with it through their claims or the claims that are made about them in the name of feminism” (231).

Lépinard’s theory emerges from her empirical research, an attempt to ensure that her book is “grounded in the social and power relations that shape feminist communities” (14). This takes the form of a comparative study of feminist organizations in France and Quebec. There are two parts to this endeavor: first, an archival research project, tracing the histories of feminist organizations in the two nations; and second, a series of ethnographic interviews with white and racialized<sup>1</sup> feminists on racism, organizing, and the relationship between religion and contemporary feminism.

It is in Lépinard’s delineation of her empirical findings that her book’s greatest strengths and also weaknesses manifest

themselves. Most interesting is her discussion of the impact of different national backgrounds on feminist praxis in each respective nation. Both Quebec and France exhibited similar national discourses regarding the relationship between the state and local religious minorities, largely of immigrant-background. A large proportion of the discussion centered on the roles and rights of religious women in public life, with a significant proportion of (usually white) feminists—or feminist-coopters—seeing Islam in particular as incompatible with women’s emancipation. These “sexularism” debates raged not only nationally but also within women’s organizations, creating room for coalition or schism within feminist groups.

Feminist organizations in Quebec and France, though sharing much in the way of background ideology and culture, manifested starkly different responses to the sexularism discourse. In Quebec, racialized feminists were able to make their voices heard, and acting in coalition with white feminists, were able to speak out on behalf of religious accommodation and against the racism and Islamophobia they saw as intrinsic to such legislation as the prohibition of facial veils. Though their efforts were not perfect, Lépinard argues that the leading Quebec feminist organization was able to “keep a critical distance from femonationalist discourses” (61). In France, however, no such distance was achieved. The leading feminist organization’s response to various instances of racism and femo-nationalism, in particular those in national policy, was so disappointing to French racialized feminists that it resulted in uproar and schism.

Lépinard credits the difference between the two nations to three key factors: 1) the strength of racialized women’s self-organizing; 2) the relationship between feminist groups and the broader left; and 3) the history of institutional relationships within umbrella organizations with groups representing racial minorities. The first and third factors seem relatively self-explanatory; it makes sense that stronger organization on the part of racialized feminists and patterns of positive interaction between white and racialized feminists would ensure that voices of color be elevated during these debates. But the second factor was surprising, and deserves further attention.

The two dominant women’s organizations Lépinard discusses, the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) in Quebec and the Collectif national pour les droits des femmes (CNDF) in France, faced different political landscapes, which resulted in their respective abilities to engage with racial and religious differences. As Lépinard describes, in Quebec during and immediately after the FFQ’s founding, the left—and in particular the radical left—was decidedly weak. As a result, the FFQ’s early institutionalization and activism made it a powerful force within leftist politics. The organization thus emerged both relatively autonomous vis-à-vis other movements as well as influential, with left-wing parties in Quebecois politics headed by former FFQ members.

The CNDF in France, on the other hand, never had the opportunity to grow in strength and autonomy in the manner of the FFQ. Lépinard analyses how CNDF’s roots



grew in the radical/class struggle of the French second-wave feminist movement, meaning that its leadership and members attempt to address class and sex oppression jointly, “a strategy that put them in constant relation to leftist politics, trying to convince leftist organizations and unions to include a gender perspective while attempting to also exist on their own and to forge coalitions with the radical feminists” (76). Unlike the FFQ, the CNDF comprises representatives of political parties and unions, meaning that the influence tends to be from outside-in, rather than the reverse. So, whereas the FFQ found the left a source of sustenance, rather than competition, the CNDF found itself struggling for power. This point matters because “the competition of the women’s liberation movement [the CNDF] with radical-left politics during the second wave encouraged white feminists to frame their claims as universal in order to resist the tendency in radical-left politics to sideline gender issues” (64). Because the FFQ did not face the same pressure, it could invest political energy into differentiation among women.

Lépinard’s archival analysis is fascinating and enlightening. Less convincing, however, are the conclusions she draws from her ethnographic work. Generally speaking, ethnography is hard to do well. The methodology is most useful when it points us to what Ian Shapiro calls “problematizing redescriptions”—“accounts of political phenomena that destabilize the lens through which we traditionally study them, engendering novel questions and exposing new avenues of moral concern.”<sup>2</sup> Ethnography is thus most productive when it uncovers for us new ways of thinking, valuing, or perceiving old phenomena. The problem with using ethnography as evidence for established fact—such as the fact that white feminists often discriminate morally and politically against feminists of color—is that a theorist is likely to fall into the well-recognized traps of the empirical researcher: first, the propensity to over-extrapolate and generalize from small samples, and second, the desire to find what it is she’s looking for.

Although Lépinard is keen to demonstrate that she does not fall prey to such temptations, she cannot help but extrapolate beyond what her data can offer. For instance, although she provides the requisite caveat that her interviews do not “exhaust the variation of feminist whiteness,” nor are they “representative of the diversity of white feminists,” she writes as though she has uncovered the true “essence” of the phenomenon (85). Occasionally she makes it explicit: in a footnote, she states that her interviews are “*representative* of how feminism is made white” (emphasis added, 284). Furthermore, her analysis “charts a general evolution in feminist whiteness” (19). This seems a stretch. From a small selection of views, she constructs a supposed ideal type—the means by which feminism is made white—and seeks to define it comprehensively. This goes beyond what ethnography can rightly claim to do.

The second, and more troubling, trap which ethnographers must fear is the tendency of the researcher to impose her own normative framework upon her subjects. When Lépinard engages in such behavior I become suspicious

not only of her methodology, but of her normative project as a whole: that moving from a subject-based approach to a relational one will help prevent white feminists from judging, othering, or excluding feminists of color.

Take for instance, her interview with three racialized feminists in France regarding legislation prohibiting the veil. Mariam is an immigrant from Mali in her fifties, Samira is another woman of presumably middle age (she was an adult during the Algerian civil war in the early 1990s, though she had immigrated to France by that point), and Maleiha leads an organization of lesbians of color in Paris. All three have lived experience dealing with oppression, racism, and the struggles of immigration. All three, also, are against veiling. Although united in opposition to the legislation, the three women see veiling as detrimental to women, and in particular to Muslim women born in France, as they highlight that veiling is a cultural, not religious, tradition. Given especially their experiences in environments in which veiling has not necessarily been an autonomous decision on the part of participants (149), they understandably see the issue as one of complexity. Lépinard, however, reads them as essentially brainwashed by white ideology:

Despite the fact that the three interviewees disapprove of the 2004 and 2010 bans, the needs and rights of veiled women are not put at the center of their critical analysis of the law. These discourses testify to the strength of hegemonic discourses in the French public sphere about secularism as necessary to emancipate women, and about the veil as a sign of oppression (148).

Implicit in this discussion is exactly the kind of judgement Lépinard thinks she can avoid: these are “bad” feminists.

Who then does Lépinard approve of? Sandra, a young activist who came of age as a feminist in the early 2010s, has the “right” political opinion. When asked about veiling, she responds: “What is emancipation? It goes back to a simple question: well, is a woman free to choose how she dresses, what she wears?” (150). For Sandra, there is no complexity. It’s “simple.” Ignoring background conditions, national discourses, and the lived experience of immigrant and other women, she expounds in the abstract: feminism is all about free choice. That this tenet of liberal feminism has been criticized since Simone de Beauvoir and before is of no import. On this banal statement, Lépinard waxes poetic, admiring how Sandra’s statement “expresses not only a political will for inclusion, but also a desire for relationality with those supposedly abject feminist subjects, a will and a wish to expand the boundaries of feminism’s moral universe and its promise of treating equally its members” (150).

Lépinard, despite her theoretical wish to remove the judging of “good” and “bad” feminists from the political project, so easily slips into their implications. One cannot help but read this chapter as follows. The middle-aged women, with all their experience and knowledge, are presumed to neglect those with whom they claim to be in community. They are “bad” feminist subjects. The young woman, on the other hand, who states the beliefs that Lépinard happens

to hold, is a “good” subject. Is this treating all who make feminist claims as political equals?

Indeed, it isn’t only the author’s inability to maintain her own approach which results in my skepticism; the entire thesis has troubling implications. The idea that anyone who makes a claim under a feminist banner is therefore to be treated as my political equal and joint compatriot in the political project strikes me as naive, to say the least. Do Phyllis Schlafly and Sarah Palin’s causes become feminist by their claims or by the claims that are made about them “in the name of feminism”? What about men’s rights activists? There are good reasons to be discriminating in determining what indeed advances the cause of feminism, and what—and who—does not.

In order to do so, it will require messy, conflictual, and difficult organizing, engaging with those within and outside the feminist project. It will require exactly the kind of work and analysis Lépinard so deftly engages in during her archival exploration. It will be painful, and it will be complicated, and it will require choosing between good and bad feminists, the same way we choose between good and bad socialists, good and bad democrats—exorcising those “false friends,” as Lorna Finlayson so aptly puts it: the Sarah Palins, Phyllis Schlaflys, and others who advocate policies which harm more than they help.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank David Klemperer, Joseph Cloward, and Caitlin Murphy-Brust for their generous insights which contributed to this review. All mistakes are, of course, my own.

#### NOTES

1. “Racialized” is the preferred term in Francophonist feminist circles, used in this text as interchangeable with more common Anglophonic phrases such as “women of color.”
2. Matthew Longo and Bernardo Zacka, “Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key.” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 4 (2019): 1066–70. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055419000431>.

## Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women

Kate Manne (Penguin Random House, 2020). 288 pp. \$27.00  
ISBN: 978-1984826558.

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Kate Manne’s *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* takes up some of the central themes that animated her 2017, *Down Girl*. Where her first book is a conceptual analysis of misogyny, Manne’s more recent book is presented as a series of case studies of particular manifestations of misogyny. These treatments of various misogynistic encounters illuminate what Manne refers to as “male privilege”—a phenomenon that encourages men to feel “entitled” to various goods and services from women, with these goods being often sexual or emotional in nature. *Entitled* inherits many of the strengths of *Down Girl* and expands the picture; it also leaves open some questions that were raised by the earlier text.

Misogyny, we should remember from *Down Girl*, is, on Manne’s view, not most fruitfully thought of as a kind of inner hateful feeling inside men’s hearts. Rather, on Manne’s account, misogyny is “best conceptualized as the ‘law enforcement’ branch of patriarchy—a system that functions to police and enforce gendered norms and expectations, and involves girls and women facing disproportionately or distinctively hostile treatment because of their gender, among other factors” (7). For Manne, misogyny is a means of policing women for their perceived failures to render unto men what is theirs. One of *Entitled*’s contributions is to offer a catalog of the occasions upon which misogyny’s policing function may be deployed.

Understanding misogyny in this way allows us to avoid trivial back-and-forth about whether any particular man *actually* hates women in his heart of hearts—a debate that in most cases can never be adequately settled, that offers too much obscurantist plausible deniability to apparently misogynistic men, and that adds little to our ability to theorize the central question of oppression as experienced from the point of view of the oppressed person. That men’s experiences are more often centered in our collective social imagination is itself a manifestation of misogyny—“himpathy,” a term Manne coined in *Down Girl*. Manne’s account of misogyny helps us to reorient our attention from men’s motivations to women’s experiences of gendered mistreatment and to find out what can be learned from this shift of perspective.

*Entitled* opens with the reader called upon to gaze, with their mind’s eye, upon an image: the sullen, bright red face of then-Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. It is a face twisted in rageful resentment that in being vetted to determine his fitness for a seat on the highest court in the land, he might be called to account for his alleged commission of sexual assault against Christine Blasey Ford when both were teenagers moving in the same social circles of an affluent DC suburb.

Rhetorically, this beginning reminds one of the cinematic device in which the camera looks first through a keyhole, one’s gaze tightly narrowed to a specific object that serves as the point of reference for all that follows as the frame widens and the field of vision expands.

Manne describes Kavanaugh as “a picture of entitlement.” What do we see in that picture? Kavanaugh is angry, white, cisgender, affluent, powerful, and protected. Ford, also white, affluent, and established in her professional career, is not without her own enjoyment of social privilege—indeed it is this positionality that likely accounts for some of the courage she exhibited on the stand and for her having gained any standing for her claims at all. However, Ford has one obvious social disadvantage with respect to Kavanaugh: he is a man and she is a woman. As a woman, far from having access to the sort of shielding and protection that Kavanaugh experienced, Ford was driven from her home by relentless violent threats against her and her family—punishment for speaking out as a victim—and as of the time of this writing, she has not yet been able to return.

Manne's invocation of the confrontation between Kavanaugh and Ford as a touchstone and framing device allows us to focus on one centrally salient fact about the field of the conflict—the disparity between how men and women are treated and, accordingly, how little men's treatment of women seems to matter. At the same time, it is also indicative of an inherent "whiteness"—and cisness, straightness, etc.—of male entitlement as it is theorized in *Entitled*.

In her contribution to a print symposium on *Down Girl* that appeared in the journal *Signs*, Peggy McIntosh noted, "most men of color cannot show they feel entitled in public without being seen as a threat."<sup>1</sup> In response, Manne clarified that it is already part of her view that Black men, for example, typically do not experience male privilege and entitlement in the way that white men do. Manne writes, "male privilege is only enjoyed in full by white, heterosexual, cis, wealthy, and nondisabled men."<sup>2</sup> The suggestion then, is that to the extent that a man is removed from this hierarchical social ideal, he enjoys male privilege to an accordingly lesser extent than do men who are white, straight, cis, affluent, nondisabled, etc.

One question we might ask is whether it is the case that the experiences of marginalized men are different from privileged white men's principally in *degree* when it comes to their enjoyment of male privilege or their lack thereof. We might alternatively wonder whether the experiences of marginalized men are sufficiently different in *kind* that we might ask, why refer to the object of analysis here as "male privilege," at all? Might there be greater utility found in a term that more clearly encapsulates or signals the role of the full complement of privileges which combine to produce the particularly noxious brand of hubristic entitlement one finds in a figure such as Brett Kavanaugh?

As it happens, I think, with Manne, that there are indeed excellent reasons to speak of various forms of identity-based privilege that track a range of mutually determining and often simultaneously operative social hierarchies, "male privilege" being one of them. As modern "western" conceptions of gender are themselves essentially shaped by colonialism and white supremacy, it is not surprising that speaking of "maleness" would always already implicate one in a range of other related identity discourses. And the notion that full enjoyment of male privilege involves the enjoyment of a whole host of other privileges does not itself make the concept any worse off than, for example, "white privilege," which we might also say is conditioned by a number of other complicating identity factors.

Yet, it seems to me to matter that white privilege discourse is typically rooted in the experience of poor and working-class people—especially, of encounters between poor and working-class Blacks and members of the so-called "white working class." That is to say, in thinking about white privilege, the image with which we begin is generally *not* of a white person who is extraordinarily affluent and in possession of all that the full suite of hierarchies of social privilege has to offer. Rather, white privilege is specifically conceived as a way of making sense of how working-class whites come to see themselves as having a stake in

a system of racial capitalism that otherwise offers them rather little. White privilege can't be—and for the most part, hasn't been—theorized in a way that takes its *paradigmatic* expression to be of privilege along one vector of identity that is enhanced by privilege associated with every other identity marker, as well.

One way in which this might matter is in its implications for our ethical responses to the sense of "entitlement" that can accommodate various varieties of privilege. Rageful entitlement and prideful sense of injury is obviously objectionable in the case of an elite, overly privileged blowhard such as Kavanaugh. His sense of entitlement is problematic and off-putting because it seems grotesque and insatiable, extending well beyond the bounds of what is seemly for any one person to seek for themselves, and apparently failing to respect the rights and boundaries of others around him (which is to say, even if we were to claim agnosticism about whether he committed the acts of which Ford accused him, we are still left with the fact that he made it plain to see that he had no respect for her right and standing even to be heard).

There are, generally speaking, at least two ways in which a sense of entitlement might be inappropriate. It might be a sense of *over-entitlement*, a conviction that one is owed much more than one is in fact actually owed. It might also get things wrong about *against whom* that claim of entitlement is appropriately made. It has been noted before that when we think of white privilege, what we have in mind is typically a combination of genuinely racist domination and some rather reasonable claims to which one might truly be entitled: the right not to experience prejudice on the basis of one's skin color, the right to be treated fairly in a court of law, etc.

Although some of the rhetorical force of Manne's use of the term, "entitled" derives from the pejorative connotations that the word has taken on in contemporary parlance, it is clear that as an ethical concept, she takes entitlement itself to be neutral. She speaks, for example, in the closing chapter, of her daughter's "warranted entitlement" to bodily autonomy, to fallibility, to epistemic justice, and so on. Manne writes, "Entitlement, as I've written about it in these pages, has most often referred to some people's undue sense of what they deserve or are owed by others. But, for all that, entitlement is *not* a dirty word: entitlements can be genuine, valid, justified" (186).

The entitlements Manne lists for her daughter (for any girl or woman), further include the entitlement "to be cared for, soothed, nurtured" (188). This is of course, a normal and reasonable human want. It is also, needless to say, an inherently social one that requires for its satisfaction another person who is willing to care, nurture, and soothe.

As in my experience of engaging with *Down Girl*, I found myself wondering how bringing the concept of "alienation" into conversation with Manne's approach might help us make sense of some of the problems and scenarios that she brings to our attention. I am especially put in mind of Marx's 1844 manuscript, "The Power of Money," which concludes thus:

Assume man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc. [. . .] If you love without evoking love in return—that is, if your loving as loving does not produce reciprocal love; if through a living expression of yourself as a loving person you do not make yourself a beloved one, then your love is impotent—a misfortune.<sup>3</sup>

Incels, such as the misogynist serial killer Elliot Rodger, whom Manne discusses as a case of “entitlement to admiration,” claim to want love, care, and yes, sex, but see themselves as locked out of an economy of wealth and physical attractiveness that unlocks access to human connection. They rebel against this with the insistence that they *deserve* intimacy from the women of their choice just on the basis of existing. It is tempting to say that they see women as objects, but it is probably more accurate to say they mostly understand that women are *not* objects, and resent it.

We live in a world that largely denies people meaning, belonging, and authentic human connection. Manne concludes *Entitled* with reflections on how she will raise her daughter to survive in a world that expects women to pick up the slack for this in their individual interactions with men. These reflections mark, Manne writes, a personal transition between the more pessimistic *Down Girl* (which ends with a meditation on Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*), and the moderately more hopeful *Entitled*. Still, Manne shares, she has “tremendous difficulty picturing a world in which girls and women can reliably lay claim to what they are entitled to, let alone one in which they get it” (192).

Of course—especially from our historical vantagepoint as women have experienced tremendous reversals and setbacks due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic and governments’ insistence on placing as much of the social burden onto the domestic caregiving space as possible—this is certainly fair enough. I’ll suggest, though, that *Entitled*, which begins with a scowling, extremely privileged white man and closes in contemplation of the life of a baby girl, also white and born into numerous forms of privilege, valuably demonstrates the contours, possibilities, and political limitations of “white” liberal feminist approaches in the contemporary moment.

Manne herself is aware of such limitations, always clear that a full accounting of sexism and women’s oppression necessarily requires a broad and diverse array of voices, of which hers is but one. And yet in engaging with *Entitled*, I at times found myself almost preferring the pessimism of *Down Girl*’s dark ending, which offered not even a glimpse of a way out. That is not because I think it is unreasonable to have fighting spirit—I certainly don’t. Much less still do I wish for Manne to be without it! But there is a tension here worth naming: to create a world without misogyny will require tearing down many features of our society that, to women most likely to share social space with especially privileged men, might seem worth keeping. The solution to women’s oppression in elite spaces doesn’t exist as such because in a world without women’s oppression, that particular problem and those elite spaces don’t exist, either.

A world without the unbridled male entitlement Kavanaugh enjoys would be a world in which his social stratum simply isn’t there; we can scarcely imagine such a world from the point of view of the women Kavanaugh encounters in his social sphere because they—*qua* highly privileged women except, largely speaking, for their experience of gender oppression—wouldn’t exist there, either. And so a perspective on misogyny from the social position of those with hardly any social privileges at all is not just a complement to more elite women’s perspectives but itself often a corrective; it can shed light not only on the social meaning of oppression in the lives of severely marginalized people but also offer greater clarity on the nature of oppression in elite spaces.

Manne writes,

Hope, to me, is a belief that the future will be brighter, which I continue not to set much store in. But the idea of fighting for a better world—and, equally importantly, fighting against backsliding—is not a belief; it’s a political *commitment* that I can get on board with. (185)

Such commitment is laudable and necessary, especially if it presages an even more pugnacious and critical turn in Manne’s theorization of misogyny. *Entitled* concretizes the themes of *Down Girl* and also reads as a transitional work: the embers of fighting spirit, Manne reports, are only newly lit. I am eager to see how their glow helps shape future directions in her contributions to the struggle against women’s oppression.

#### NOTES

1. Peggy McIntosh, “Hurts and More Hurts,” in “Short Takes: Kate Manne’s *Entitled*,” *Signs*, <http://signsjournal.org/entitled/>.
2. Kate Manne, “A Response,” in “Short Takes: Kate Manne’s *Entitled*,” *Signs*, <http://signsjournal.org/entitled/>.
3. Karl Marx, “The Power of Money,” *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3: *Karl Marx March 1843–August 1844* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 322.

## Irigaray and Politics: A Critical Introduction

Laura Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019). 224 pages. £24.99. ISBN Paperback: 978-1474422826 Hardback: 978-1474422819.

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Laura Roberts’s *Irigaray and Politics* situates the contributions of the French feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray within the larger framework of political theory and ponders the social and political resonance of her ideas in a globalizing world. As the reader progresses through the chapters, it becomes more and more apparent that Roberts’s inquiry into the larger political significance of Irigaray’s oeuvre is guided by a decolonial sensibility and meticulous attention to interlocking systems of oppression. Roberts



employs a feminist methodology in thinking through lived experience and social positionality. From the outset, she is explicit about the historical background that informs her engagement with Irigaray. She notes that witnessing the dismantling of apartheid as a white South African woman “provided a distinct, perhaps decolonial, lens through which [she] first encountered Irigaray’s philosophy” (6). Roberts’s analysis through this lens offers a refreshing approach to Irigaray’s intellectual heritage. She reads Irigaray’s work in conversation with some unlikely interlocutors, including but not limited to, Gayatri Spivak, Silvia Federici, and bell hooks, whose philosophical connections to Irigaray have thus far been underexplored. In this sense, Roberts makes an original contribution to the existing literature on Irigaray, while at the same time identifying, through an Irigarayan framework, the negligences of the political theory on the Left, which, she suggests, continues to be dominated by male thinkers residing in the West. “What’s left of the Left,” she writes, “misunderstands the feminist politics of experience; they fail to see the relevance of the politics of desire and the affirmation of alternative ways of becoming subjects” (ix). The book, in this way, seeks to fill an important gap, not only in Irigaray scholarship, but also in political theory at large, as the author rethinks some contemporary social movements from an Irigarayan lens. In this way, the book serves as a reminder of feminist “schemes, methods, practices of tactics” (ibid.) that bear on the political through an analysis that centralizes Irigaray but also goes beyond by way of reconsidering Irigaray’s work in the context of postcolonialism, globalization, and local struggles that seek to respond to global problems.

Beginning from the question of sexual difference, Irigaray’s philosophical challenge, Roberts argues, “opens up new foundations and possibilities of rethinking politics based on relational sexuate subjects” (3). As a critique of the universal subject posited by Western philosophical and cultural traditions, Irigaray seeks to rethink subjectivity not through the model of oneness or sameness, but from out of sexuate difference or as she puts it, twoness. This move enables Roberts to envision other forms of relationality that would not be based on domination, to which the model of the universal subject is susceptible. That is to say, starting from this question of sexuate difference, one would be able to envision inclusion beyond assimilation. Arguing against reductionist readings of Irigaray that portray her as an essentialist, Roberts sets out to explore the nuances in Irigaray’s thinking on sexuate difference and the possibilities for radical social and political change that such thinking embodies. Roberts suggests that Irigaray seeks to bring out the difference (i.e. alterity) at the very heart of philosophy and politics, in an attempt to undermine the hegemony of the One—that is, the narcissistic sameness that permeates Western thought. This ontological challenge, as Roberts puts it, “gives rise to a politics of grace and wonder, requiring us to rethink our relations with one another, and to constantly push the boundaries, to crack open time and to invent the new” (6). The new, here, refers not only to new subjectivities, and accordingly, new ways of seeing, feeling, being, and relating; but also, as Roberts demonstrates later in the book, new ways of socially organizing and building pockets of resistance and communities of care.

The first chapter focuses on Irigaray’s ambivalent relation to psychoanalysis. While psychoanalysis can often serve as a tool to diagnose, classify, and treat individuals as part of the efforts toward regulation and normalization, Roberts’s engagement with Irigarayan psychoanalysis in this chapter shows that it can also be used for a cultural diagnosis or a symptomatology of a political kind, and thereby help facilitate social change. Roberts notes that, while Irigaray uses the conceptual tools that psychoanalysis offers to bring sexuate difference to the fore, she is also highly critical of both Freud and Lacan, who defined “female sexuality as lacking” (27). At the end of this chapter, Roberts thus establishes an important and insightful connection between Irigaray’s thought and contemporary decolonial philosophy. She suggests that Irigaray’s diagnosis of Western culture as “a culture of narcissism, supporting and supported by the universal (masculine) narcissistic subject” (13) is analogous to what bell hooks has called a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (32). “Contemporary decolonial philosophers, in various ways,” she writes, “illustrate the connections between world historical, socio-political events and how these continue to enable epistemic privileging of the phallogocentric logic of western metaphysics which nurtures this narcissistic subject that founds western metaphysics” (35). Irigaray’s critique of western phallogocentrism, in other words, is amenable to a decolonial analysis.

Roberts then goes on to explore imaginings of “an autonomous feminine subjectivity” (45) that would disrupt this culture of narcissism that privileges sameness. She suggests that Irigaray’s project is not only critical, but also creative: “Irigaray is concerned with creating a positive feminine symbolic and a feminine divine in order to bring about a feminine subjectivity that allows for a woman-to-woman sociality in which women, as autonomous sexuate subjects, can relate to and love one another as sexuate subjects” (79). Defending Irigaray against common criticisms of essentialism, Roberts argues that rather than seeking to define “woman,” Irigaray aims to open up the symbolic for women’s self-articulation that is yet to come. That is to say, Roberts suggests that Irigaray seeks to carve a space for the emergence of a new subjectivity (i.e. feminine subjectivity), which has previously been foreclosed under the hegemony of the One (i.e. masculine subjectivity that is accepted as universal). Feminine subjectivity, in this regard, is not something that is pre-given and waiting to be discovered, but rather something to be invented.

Next, Roberts focuses on Irigaray’s later work which deals with questions around ethics. Taking, as a starting point, Irigaray’s ethics of relating to the other with love, attentiveness, responsiveness, and wonder (instead of narcissistic arrogance), Roberts provides a sketch of an anti-imperialist ethics by engaging with Spivak’s Irigarayan ethics, where radical uncertainty and alterity are central to women’s solidarity. Bridging ethics and politics, the last chapter focuses on an Irigarayan approach to home, family, and community as political sites. In this chapter, Roberts explores the resonance of Marxist feminism in Irigaray’s thinking and considers social movements like municipalism that seek to reconfigure the aforementioned sites through a “feminisation of politics” (155)—that is, the valorization of feminine values, like attentiveness and

empathy, within the sphere of politics. Roberts concludes that Irigaray's project is at once both philosophical and political: "It is a political-philosophical project, a politics that is founded upon the recognition of the sexuate other in the emergence of subjectivity, and gives rise to a politics of grace and wonder, and requires the courage to step into the unknown, to push the boundaries to crack open time and to invent the new" (159). Here Roberts's analysis presents a novel way of thinking about Irigaray's critical/creative political-philosophical project by drawing connections with contemporary social movements. These connections help ground the theory and render it concrete and historically situated for the readers.

Roberts's analysis presents the complexity of Irigaray's ideas in a clear, nuanced way. This thoughtful treatment of Irigaray, however, is not mirrored by an equally attentive consideration of Irigaray's use of language in complex, obscure, metaphorical, and performative ways—especially in her earlier writings—that seek to disrupt and undermine the phallogocentric symbolic order and give birth to the new. Of course, Roberts does not altogether overlook the significance of style: "Irigaray's poetic and dialogic writing style mimics the qualities of fluidity and openness she sees connected to the feminine body" (87). This, however, is the extent to which the book explores the role of style in Irigaray's thought, which seems like a missed opportunity. A more elaborate take on the ways in which Irigaray uses language in captivating ways, performing the very thought she seeks out to explore by way of taking the reader on an imaginative journey through her poetic style of writing would have further strengthened Roberts's argument about the role of the critical/creative in Irigaray's political-philosophical project.

Grounding Irigaray's thought in political action is an important strength of the book. Bridging theory and praxis, Roberts's narrative moves from the question of sexuate difference to subjectivity and imagination, from questions around ethics to postcolonialism, women's solidarity, and social movements. More than an eloquent introduction to Irigaray's thought, then, Roberts's book seeks to make insightful connections between these different fields and bodies of literature. It thereby establishes much needed dialogues between Irigaray, decolonial thought, and political activism.

Roberts's analysis also offers important responses to one of the most common criticisms raised against Irigaray: that of essentialism. Roberts writes:

Irigaray is well aware of the lived differences between women, and her argument for sexuate rights is not an attempt to cover over differences, or ignore differences between women. Rather we must read this as part of the mediations necessary for feminine subjectivity, woman-as-subject, in all her different ways of being, to emerge. We require new myths, new ontological structures, new religions, new politics, and we require new laws." (83)

While I find Roberts's reading of Irigaray as a non-essentialist helpful, I also wonder whether replacing One (the subject of narcissism) with Two would prove adequate when it comes to the oppressiveness of the binary system of gender. Would it be possible, I wonder, to take up these notions of fluidity and difference beyond the masculine/feminine dyad? To take the question a step further, would it be possible, at all, to *queer* Irigaray? Sexual difference, after all, is not synonymous with sexual multiplicity, and the significance of this distinction may serve to make Irigaray relevant to queer politics. It would be worthwhile, I think, to push the question of sexual difference a step further and think about the possibility of an Irigarayan ethics and politics beyond the gender binary.

Throughout the book, Roberts offers a compelling analysis that establishes novel connections between Irigaray's thought and various other figures within political theory, like hooks, Spivak, and Federici. In this way, the book identifies and responds to important gaps in Irigaray scholarship and ventures into hitherto uncharted territories. Roberts's account is a clear and concrete take on a complex, difficult thinker, which makes this book a good fit for both specialists and non-specialists. While making important contributions to Irigaray scholarship, thanks to its clear style of writing and conciseness, *Irigaray and Politics* would equally be suited for consideration in undergraduate seminars.

Roberts's book both provides a clear introduction to Irigaray's thought and offers space to expand the larger significance of the conceptual toolbox offered by Irigaray's writings. In this sense, it speaks to Irigaray scholars, political activists, and those who are unfamiliar with Irigaray's work alike. Roberts somehow manages to render Irigaray's thought concrete and accessible, without diminishing her philosophical complexity. While she makes a valuable contribution to scholarship by rethinking Irigaray in the postcolonial context, it is clear that Roberts's engagement also resonates well beyond the confines of academia.

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